

Disney
— THE CURSE OF —
MALEFICENT

—
THE TALE OF A SLEEPING BEAUTY





ONCE UPON A TIME . . .



IN A FARAWAY LAND . . .



...THERE LIVED A
BEAUTIFUL PRINCESS.



... ALL SHE NEEDED
WAS TRUE LOVE'S KISS.





... BUT FIRST,
BEYOND THIS PLACE
THERE BE DRAGONS.



Disney
MALEFICENT

THE CURSE OF MALEFICENT:
THE TALE OF A SLEEPING BEAUTY

Adapted by Elizabeth Rudnick

Illustrated by Nicholas Kole

Based on the screenplay by Linda Woolverton

Executive Producers Angelina Jolie Don Hahn Palak Patel

Matt Smith Sarah Bradshaw

Produced by Joe Roth

Directed by Robert Stromberg

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Special thanks to Brittany Candau.

For all the “good” and all the “bad” creatures in the world. For as the saying goes, the difference between a hero and a villain often depends on perspective.





1



Robin

put a small finger
to his lips,
looking back at his young partner in crime. The small, sprightly faerie grinned when he saw the determined expression on Maleficent's face. *Aye*, he thought gleefully. *She's going to be possumly perfect at this.*

They flew low through the beautiful, lush Moors, until they reached their target, the bog where Knotgrass, Flittle, and Thistlewit lived. These three silly pixies were always together. Vain, high-strung creatures that found anything to complain or bicker about, they were the perfect companions for one another. They didn't know how to relax or how to have fun, things Robin did particularly well. Which meant they were the perfect candidates for a little practical joking.

Landing in the tall reeds, Robin and Maleficent crouched down. They watched Knotgrass and Flittle bicker crossly, while Thistlewit tried to rub the mud out of her dress.

"I spent all afternoon finding this perfect palm fan," Knotgrass declared, waving a huge shiny leaf in front of her face. "You absolutely *cannot* and *will not* share it with me. Now, shoo. You're giving me a headache."

"Oh, come on," Flittle whined. "That's the last good one. Besides, it completely clashes with your outfit. Everyone knows that green goes best with *blue*!" She gestured at her blue smock.

“Ooh, that would make the perfect hat!” Thistlewit added, abandoning her pointless cleaning. “What if it rains and I don’t have any shelter to keep my hair dry?”

“Don’t even say such things,” Knotgrass chided. “A rainstorm! The horror!”

Robin and Maleficent shared a look, a plan forming between them. Robin nodded to Maleficent, who took to the air. Still a child, Maleficent had difficulty managing her large raven wings, the heavy horns on her head throwing off her balance. She climbed into the air a little haphazardly, then straightened out, soaring through the clouds.

Seeing the young faerie fly reminded Robin of Maleficent’s mother, Hermia. Hermia had been beautiful, with long, dark locks, a tall, human-sized frame, and magnificent black wings. Maleficent would no doubt be the striking image of her mother when she grew up. Except for her eyes, of course. Maleficent had inherited her eyes from her father, Lysander. They sparkled like glowing jade pools.

Robin’s normally cheerful face contorted itself into a rare frown. Hermia and Lysander. It made him sad to think about Maleficent’s parents. They had been such special faeries, and his friends for such a long time. It had been their life’s work to create peace between the human world and the Faerie Moors—even though humans had a long history of attacking the Moors, of trying to take over the land and steal its natural riches.

No, Maleficent’s parents had believed that peace was achievable, that there were some good humans out there who appreciated nature as much as they did. They even befriended some farmers and shepherds nearby in the effort to forge harmony between the two groups, something that was unheard of in the Moors. They were determined to change the course of history, to create a peaceful environment in which their daughter would grow.

But sadly, it was this optimism that led Hermia and Lysander to the front lines of the next human attack, thinking they could reason with the humans to end the battle before any blood was spilled on either side. Unfortunately, the humans did not share their views on the matter. It had been another violent war. And while the Fair Folk once again defended their home from the greedy humans, it had come at the price of Hermia’s and Lysander’s lives.

Ever since that sad night, Robin and the rest of the Fair Folk had banded together to raise Maleficent. She'd been such an easy baby, so happy and carefree. So content to play with the butterflies in the grove, to be bathed in a babbling brook, or to be resting in the cradle of the Rowan Tree, her home. She was also quite willful and lively. As soon as she could walk and talk, Maleficent asserted an independence beyond her years. It became apparent the daughter of Hermia and Lysander could look after herself, though she did enjoy spending time with the other faeries, making them her friends and companions instead of her caretakers.

"Rooooooooooooobiiiiin," Maleficent called, suddenly hovering above the small faerie. "What's taking you so long?"

Shaken out of his reverie, Robin looked up at the commanding young faerie above him, so full of life. And he thought how proud her parents would be of her. Then the sound of the three pixies arguing about who deserved to be dry during a storm interrupted the moment.

"Hold your horsefeathers, lass," he loudly whispered back. He'd been so caught up in reflecting on the past that he'd nearly forgotten they were in the middle of a game. He jumped to, rubbing his hands together with excitement.

Maleficent took to the sky once more, faltering a bit in her effort to gain some height. Hidden behind the tall trees, she spread her wings wide, covering the late afternoon sunlight that had been peeking through the trees. She flapped her wings as hard as she could, the sound mimicking a rolling thunder.

The pixies hushed one another. They looked up at the darkened sky in a slow, dramatic fashion, their foreheads crinkling with worry.

Hearing his cue, Robin dipped his wooden flask into the pool and then covered himself with the fluffy gray marsh grasses that surrounded the pond next to him. He glanced at his reflection in the water, turning left and right. *Well, well*, he thought approvingly. *I look pretty good as a cloud, if I do say so meself*. Then Robin jumped into the air, making a beeline for the three pixies. As soon as he was directly above them, he started shaking his flask, water dripping down directly on their upturned heads.

"Ah!" Thistlewit yelled. "It's happening! The rainstorm!"

"Give it to me, Knotgrass!" Flittle demanded, reaching for the palm.

The three pixies struggled, their scuffle moving them away from Robin's rain cloud.

After a few seconds, they realized they were no longer getting hit with water. “Hey! It’s dry over here,” Thistlewit observed after a while.

“Don’t be daft,” Knotgrass replied. Then she put out her hand and looked up. “But wait...it *is* dry over here.”

Robin held in a laugh, maneuvering his cloud in the air until he was directly over them, spilling droplets onto them once more. They shrieked, abandoning the leaf and fleeing from the rain cloud that seemed to be following them.

“My dress!” Flittle yelled.

“My hair!” Thistlewit cried.

“My headache!” Knotgrass screamed.

When Robin ran out of water, he flew to Maleficent’s side.

“My, what temperamental weather we’re having,” Robin said. Maleficent snorted, and soon they were doubled over in the air with laughter. They started to fly away, finding it difficult to fly straight with the fits of giggles that overcame them.

Soon they arrived at Maleficent’s home in the Moors, the sprawling Rowan Tree. The sun sank low in the distance, marking the end of another wonderful day. Maleficent leaned against the sturdy trunk of her tree. Robin flew to his own home, a nearby birch tree overlooking the beautiful Faeire Mound.

“Hello, Sweetpea! Good evening, Finch! Beautiful flower work today, Adella.” Maleficent and Robin greeted their faerie neighbors, who smiled and waved from their own cozy abodes. Soon they all settled in, ready once more to be audience members in the recurring performance of day’s transformation into night. They oohed and aahed at the sky as it changed from vibrant reds, oranges, and pinks to cool, majestic purples and blues. They cheered as the frogs croaked and hundreds of glow faeries buzzed by, looking like earthbound stars.

Yawning widely, Maleficent bade good night to Robin and all of her neighboring faerie, animal, and plant friends.

“Good night, Sweetpea! Good night, Finch! Good night, Adella!”

Then, in a small voice that could barely be heard above the chorus of evening chirps and caws, she whispered to the glowing moon, “Good night, Mother. Good night, Father.”





One

lazy afternoon, a dragonfly hovered around the grand Rowan Tree, its wings shimmering in the sunlight. Maleficent lounged in the crook of the towering, elegantly twirling mass of sturdy roots, reaching branches, and vibrant leaves. It was her favorite place in the world, her home.

Robin was perched in front of her, ignoring the buzzing dragonfly, and animatedly regaling Maleficent with stories about her parents. She always asked him to share these tales, even though she'd heard them hundreds of times. And for Robin's part, he was always happy to oblige. He was a storyteller and a showman at heart.

"And then I popped up from under the bog, scaring the living fireflies out of Lysander, I did." Robin reenacted the scene with a dramatic flourish before bursting into peals of laughter.

Maleficent joined in. "Oh, Robin, you devil! When he was trying so hard to impress my mother," she giggled.

"He still impressed her, even after jumping ten feet high like a scared ninny."

After their laughter subsided, Maleficent carefully brought up the subject that Robin always avoided.

“Robin...have you ever seen a human close up?” she asked casually.

Robin’s normally cheerful features furrowed themselves into a frown. “No, lass, I have not. Nor would I want to. They’re nothing but trouble, humans.”

Maleficent sat up, talking more excitedly now. “But you said my parents believed there were good ones out there. That we could have a good relationship with them someday.”

“I did,” Robin said. “But you know what that belief cost them.” He spoke gently but firmly. It was sometimes hard to remember how young, how innocent Maleficent still was. She wasn’t old enough to remember the war-stricken years. “They try to steal our treasures, pillage our land. They even carry weapons made out of iron, they do, the stuff that burns our kind.”

“But, Robin, humans are a part of nature, too,” she continued. She’d clearly been thinking quite a bit about this. “I know there are horrendous ones. Monsters. But there are mean faeries and animals out there, too, just like there are plenty of nice ones. The humans cannot be all bad.”

Robin sat quietly. He could not give her the answer she wanted. In truth, he hated all humans for taking away his dear friends. He might have agreed with Lysander and Hermia’s push for harmony with humans at one time, but he did not now. After all he had been through, he just couldn’t.

“No, my love,” he said, patting her arm. “They are.” And with that, he flew away from the Rowan Tree, understanding Maleficent’s desire to honor her parents’ memory, but worried by the way she was choosing to do it. He hoped her curiosity would die down soon.



Unfortunately, her curiosity only grew, and Maleficent did not heed Robin’s warning about the humans. Two days later, word spread that a human boy had been caught stealing from the pool of jewels. Jumping at the opportunity to see a human up close, Maleficent headed straight for the majestic waterfall that flowed into the pool.

Robin knew that Maleficent could take care of herself. And that she did not need, nor did she want, him telling her what to do. But he couldn’t help feeling that he had to watch over her. Especially if humans were involved. So Robin followed her, trailing a safe distance behind so she would not see him.

He followed her past the water faeries skating on a stream, through the flower-filled meadows teeming with pollen faeries, and above the wallerbogs splashing around in the muddy marshes. Soon they were in front of the great waterfall, where two sentries, towering wooden creatures, stood in the marsh nearby. The sentries served as the Moors' border guards, a job they took very seriously. The taller of the two (which was saying a lot), Balthazar, called out to Maleficent in his native woodish tongue.

"It's hiding in the brush," he told her. "Be careful."

Maleficent held her head up proudly. "I'm not afraid. Besides, I've never seen a human up close." Robin watched as she peered through the dense flora. Robin squinted his eyes, hovering as close to the scene as he dared. Maleficent might not have been afraid, but *he* certainly was.

"What did he take from the pool?" Maleficent asked.

"A stone," Balthazar replied. It figured. Robin rolled his eyes. Humans were always after worthless objects like shiny stones, never realizing the true treasures were the plants and animals surrounding them.

"Come out," Maleficent said to the brush.

"No!" a small yet defiant voice called back. "They mean to kill me. Besides, they're hideous to look at."

Robin was in the middle of another eye roll when Balthazar emitted an offended screech. He didn't blame the sentry. Not only did this human think the creatures of the Moors resorted to the violent human way of resolving conflicts, he also insulted their kind in the process.

Echoing Robin's thoughts, Maleficent chided the voice. "That's extremely rude!" she yelled. Then, giving Balthazar a comforting look, she said, "Don't listen to him. You're classically handsome."

Maleficent turned to the brush once more, speaking more emphatically this time. "It's not right to steal, but we don't kill people for it. Come out. Come out this instant!"

Robin was surprised to see a slight boy dressed in meager clothes emerge. He couldn't have been much older than Maleficent. As soon as he saw her, he flinched, a flash of recognition darting across his face.

"You're her," he said.

Robin frowned suspiciously, wondering just how this human thought he knew Maleficent.

Maleficent looked the human up and down. "Are you fully grown?"

"No."

Maleficent turned to Balthazar. "I believe he's just a boy."

"And you're just a girl," the boy said. "I think."

Robin stifled a chuckle. *That* comment wasn't going to go over well. He expected Maleficent to put the boy in his place, showing this human the gumption he so admired in her. But she simply narrowed her eyes.

"Who are you?"

"I'm called Stefan. Who are you?"

"I'm Maleficent." She paused, then said abruptly, "Do you intend us harm?"

Robin was proud of Maleficent. She was being cautious. It looked like she had learned something from the Fair Folk after all.

Stefan blinked at her, clearly surprised. "What? No."

"Then I'll guide you out of the Moors."

"The stone, dear," Balthazar prompted.

"Yes, right," Maleficent answered. Then she looked at Stefan. "You have to give it back."

"Give what back?" Stefan asked.

Maleficent shared a look with the sentries and sighed. Holding out her hand, she stared at Stefan. Finally, the human boy groaned, realizing he'd been caught. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the beautiful stone he'd stolen. It glistened in the bright sunlight. Then he grimaced as he threw it to Maleficent, as if it hurt him to return it.

Maleficent easily caught the sparkling stone. She tossed it into a nearby pool, which rippled happily. Gesturing Stefan to follow her, she started through the dense forest.

Robin noticed at once that she was walking instead of flying. Probably as a courtesy to the human. He sighed, hurrying behind them, not liking one bit that she had offered to be his guide. *Well, at least he's leaving*, Robin thought.

"If I knew you would throw it away, I would have kept it," Stefan whined. *The ungrateful little toadstool.*

"I didn't throw it away," Maleficent responded. "I delivered it home. As I'm going to do for you."

They walked in silence for a while, Robin darting from tree to tree and plant to plant, blending in with his surroundings. Soon they found themselves in a beautiful clearing, with vast, rolling fields and the cold gray castle suddenly in view. Robin scrunched his nose. What a distasteful way to live, behind such high walls blocking out everything that mattered.

Stefan, too, was looking in that direction. But it appeared that his opinion of the stone fortress was much different. “Someday, I’ll live there. In the castle.” His jaw was set with determination, a determination that made Robin uneasy.

“Where do you live now?” Maleficent asked.

“In a barn,” Stefan replied.

Maleficent leaned forward, interest sparkling in her green eyes. “A barn? So your parents are farmers, then?”

Stefan shook his head. “My parents are dead.”

“Mine too,” she said softly.

“How did they die? Plague?” Stefan asked.

“They were killed by humans. In the last war.” She gestured toward the forest. “Now all the family I have is in there.”

That’s right, Robin cheered silently. He was glad she’d mentioned the fate of her parents, showing the boy that she knew exactly what humans were capable of. He was even more pleased to hear her call him and the rest of the Fair Folk her family. Though they rarely said such things aloud, it was how he and the rest of the creatures felt about Maleficent. They were her adopted family.

“That’s sad,” Stefan replied, frowning.

“No it’s not,” Maleficent responded. “They’re all I need.” Robin beamed. *What a great faerie, that one.*

Suddenly, Stefan turned to Maleficent, looking at her intensely. “We’ll see each other again.”

Maleficent sighed. “You really shouldn’t come back here, you know. It’s not safe.”

“Would that not be up to me?” Stefan asked. He stepped closer to her, making Robin clench his fists reflexively. What did he think he was doing?

“It would,” she replied, keeping her eyes locked on his.

“And if I made that choice, if I came back...would you be here?” He was only a few inches away from her now, and Robin shook with anger.

“Perhaps,” was all Maleficent said. But Robin could see the subtle blush in her cheeks. She was pleased.

Stefan offered his hand, and she reached out to take it. Suddenly, she pulled her hand back. She gasped, clearly in pain. Robin zoomed forward, about to interfere.

“What happened?” Stefan asked with a shocked tone.

“Your ring is made of iron,” Maleficent explained, shaking her hand.

Stefan looked alarmed, which seemed like an odd reaction if it had been his intent to hurt her. Robin paused, watching the curious creature. The boy apologized and then took the ring off, throwing it far out into the field. Maleficent appeared to be touched, but Robin was still leery of this human. What was his game?

At that moment, Stefan smiled and started to walk away. After hurrying down a hill, he abruptly turned back toward Maleficent.

“I like your wings!” he called.

Maleficent smiled widely, a smile which turned into a giggle.

Jumping jackhoppers, Robin thought grimly. *This is not good.*



Later that afternoon, Robin and Maleficent sat in the Rowan Tree, playing a guessing game. Even though Robin was thinking of the most obvious object nearby, the cloud shaped like a dragon drifting overhead, Maleficent still hadn't guessed it. She had a silly, faraway gaze on her face. Robin hemmed and hawed noisily. But it wasn't doing any good. Maleficent appeared to be in her own little world.

Finally, Robin gave up on the game, asking about Maleficent's day. He wondered if she would tell him about the encounter with the human.

“See anything interesting today?” he asked casually.

“Hmm? Oh, no, not really,” she said, smiling to herself.

“Come across anything strange? Out of place?” He flew down to her, hovering in front of her face.

Maleficent rested her chin in her hands. “Sort of.”

Robin couldn't take it anymore. “Did you meet anybody new?”

“Yes,” Maleficent responded.

Shocked, Robin looked at her, waiting for her to proceed. “A new nosy friend who's asking me quite a lot of questions. You don't happen to know where Robin is, do you?”

Robin harrumphed. There was a slight pause, then Maleficent spoke once more.

“And you were thinking of the dragon-shaped cloud. I win.”

She winked at him. Robin snorted with amusement, despite himself.



Robin

saw less and less
of Maleficent in

the years that followed. He would often fly to the Rowan Tree with a new game or prank in mind only to find the tree empty. Other times, he would spot her soaring overhead, always flying in the direction of the border. While they never spoke about it, Robin knew she'd been meeting the human called Stefan. And whenever Robin *did* see Maleficent, he noticed that she was constantly smiling, beaming with what could only be the glow of a first love. Yes, she was clearly smitten with this Stefan. Perhaps she even felt a connection to her parents by befriendng a human. Robin still did not trust him, but he had to admit that the boy seemed to make her very happy.

Robin hoped against hope that he was wrong about this human. That his fears of Maleficent getting hurt would never be realized. Sometimes he thought that this might be the happy ending he'd always hoped for Maleficent, the happy ending her parents would have wanted. Maybe it was possible. Maybe there could be peace between the faeries and humans just like Hermia, Lysander, and Maleficent had always told him. And maybe Maleficent and Stefan's relationship was the first step toward that peace.

Nevertheless, he couldn't bring himself to talk to Maleficent about the boy. The memory of the wars with the humans, of Hermia's and

Lysander's murders by their kind, that was a wound that still ached.

And then, one dark evening, it happened again. Another human attack at the border of the Moors. The still night erupted into a flurry of shouts and screeches. Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed in the distance. Word spread like wildfire: humans, a whole army of them, had come to overtake them and all of their precious land.

The strongest creatures of the Moors rushed to the front lines to defend their land, creatures with scales, creatures with feet that turned backward, creatures with leather wings. They crawled and croaked, snarled and slobbered, rushing past the beautiful Faerie Mound, which now seemed dark and gloomy, as if the land itself were upset by this turn of events.

"Hurry! She's out there alone!" a creature with black spiky fur shouted loudly as he galloped toward the border.

Robin heard the creature from the brush nearby. He flew up in front of him, forcing the creature to stop.

"Who is?" Robin demanded.

"Maleficent!" the creature answered.

Robin's heart dropped. Oh, Maleficent. The brave lass. No matter what her relationship with the human was, she truly loved the Moors and the Fair Folk who lived there. She had gone to the front lines, risking her life to protect them. They had to help her. "Come on!" he shouted to the dew faeries nearby. "Maleficent's in trouble."

They flew together at lightning speed, more faeries joining them along the way, creating a colorful swarm driven by the desire to get to their courageous Maleficent and help her defend their home.

As soon as they reached the border, they saw the creatures of the Moors fighting off the mass of sword-wielding humans. Robin scanned the crowd, searching for any sign of his horned friend. Finally, he spotted her.

In the distance, the leader of the humans, King Henry, was charging at his friend. Maleficent held her ground, her chin up in defiance. She hovered above the king, battering him with her wings, which now looked like gigantic feathered claws. Finally, the king lost his balance and fell off his horse.

"You will not have the Moors, now or ever!" Robin heard Maleficent cry. A surge of pride welled within him. Then he watched in horror as he saw the king raise his armored hand toward Maleficent.

“Watch out!” Robin cried, but his voice was muffled by all the chaos around him. The iron touched Maleficent’s cheek.

The tall faerie gasped in pain, her hands clutching her face. Noticing his enemy was distracted, King Henry scrambled to his feet and shuffled away as fast as he could. Robin suddenly felt horses, people, and creatures brush past his shoulders. It seemed the rest of the human army was following their leader, retreating from the Moors.

Soon the sounds of violence gave way to sounds of horses galloping into the night. The Fair Folk cheered. They had done it. They had defended their home from destructive, greedy humans once more.

Robin looked around frantically, having lost Maleficent in the crowd. Finally, he saw her. She was flying away, a confused and worried expression on her face. Relieved to see that she was not hurt, he watched her go, resisting the urge to follow her.

He knew she would want to be alone at a time like this. While he hadn’t seen Stefan in the army, he wondered if he’d been involved in the attack somehow. Or, at the very least, if he’d known about it.

There were so many things that were not clear, things that Maleficent would have to sort out for herself. One thing was certain, however. Maleficent was a hero in the Moors that night.



When Robin didn’t see Maleficent for a couple of days, he figured she was still taking her alone time. After a week, he grew worried.

“Have you seen Maleficent?” he asked Sweetpea one sunny morning.

The purple faerie frowned. “You didn’t hear? I thought you would be the first to know.”

“Know what?” Robin was growing impatient now.

“Maleficent left the Moors.”

Robin was shocked. “She what?”

“She left,” Sweetpea said sorrowfully. “With the human, we think. He came to visit her at the border a couple of days after the battle. We haven’t seen hide nor hair of her since.”

Robin gasped. It couldn’t be true. Without responding to Sweetpea, he took to the sky, first soaring to the Rowan Tree, then to the rest of Maleficent’s favorite spots in the Moors. She was nowhere to be found.

He flew up and out, higher and higher, farther and farther away from the Moors. He searched acres upon acres of land without seeing any sign

of her.

Finally, he gave up, returning home with his head hung low. It wasn't safe for him out in the human world, and it was clear Maleficent did not want to be found. He sighed, hoping that she was okay. That maybe, just maybe, she'd found her happily ever after, after all.



Over the next few weeks, a piercing wind blew through the Moors, and a collective shiver hit the creatures there. Something was not right. They could all feel it. Great change was in the air.

One day, worrisome chatter from local sparrows reached the Moors, chatter that could only be about Maleficent. Sweetpea took the birds to Robin's birch tree, knowing he would want to be the first to hear their tale. They spoke of a horned faerie whose wings had been brutally cut and taken by her human companion. Who wandered around, using a wooden staff to steady her. Who had taken refuge in the ruins of a long-abandoned castle nearby.

Robin sprung into the air. "We have to go to her!" While he had always been suspicious of Stefan, he would never have guessed the boy would have betrayed Maleficent in such a horrific way. Taking her wings! He couldn't imagine the pain she had gone through.

Wait, the birds chirped. There is more. The human took the wings to the castle to prove that he avenged the dying king. And now he is to be King Henry's successor.

"He did it to gain the throne!" Robin shouted, even more outraged.

"What about Maleficent?" Sweetpea interjected. "Is she in the castle ruins now?"

According to the sparrows, Maleficent was seen rescuing a raven in trouble near the ruins. The raven, a friend of a friend, was named Diaval. He had been caught in the net of two farmers with clubs in their hands and snarling dogs at their sides. She had waved her staff and turned Diaval into a man, saving his life. Diaval now served as her companion in the castle ruins, and she changed him from raven to man at her will.

Robin and Sweetpea stared at the birds. Maleficent had saved an animal in need. That, at least, sounded like her. But the way she had done it...the forces she had summoned to completely change him into a new form at her whim...that was very powerful magic, magic that surfaced only when one was under great emotional distress. While Maleficent, like

the other faeries, had always had powers to help plants grow, heal animals, usher along streams, and the like, they'd never seen her—or any faerie, for that matter—do anything like this. This was a dark magic.

Stunned, the faeries thanked the birds for the information. Then they sat silently in the birch tree, processing what they had just learned.

“We need to give her some more time,” Sweetpea finally said, articulating what they were both thinking, no matter how much it grieved them. “She’s been through too much. She is not herself.”

Robin nodded. Sweetpea gently touched his arm. “She will return when she’s ready.”

They sat there for a long time, thinking about the kind, strong faerie they had all raised together. A faerie who knew the Moors, who represented the Moors better than anyone. And now, just as she had transformed the raven called Diaval, she, too, had been transformed.



PART TWO



Ducking

and weaving to avoid being hit by a stray broom or loose rag in the bustling preparations, the tiny flower pixie Knotgrass made her way toward the castle's Great Hall. She didn't want to miss a moment of that day's celebration. For that day, Princess Aurora was to be christened. And Knotgrass, along with the other two flower pixies who called the castle home, was to play a big part in the ceremony.

As she flew down one of the long hallways, Knotgrass was joined by Thistlewit and Flittle. The other two flower pixies were younger than Knotgrass and, in her opinion, were utter fools. They had no idea how important that day was. While Knotgrass was wearing her finest red dress, she doubted that the others had barely even bothered to clean up as she had. Thistlewit, the youngest of the three, was in her usual green dress, its long skirt made up of various leaves that seemed almost to be wilting. Her hair was disheveled and she was humming an aggravating little tune under her breath. Flying right behind her was Flittle. This pixie was, as usual, surrounded by butterflies that hovered around her head. She wore her favorite blue outfit, complete with a little blue pointed hat. Blue, Flittle liked to remind everyone, was her favorite color. Knotgrass found her obsession with the color infuriating, but today she didn't have the time to care.

Knotgrass believed she was the only reason the pixies were safe in the castle at all. And while the others made fun of her, calling her cranky and saying her wings would be wrinkled with worry lines if wings could *have* lines, Knotgrass didn't give it much thought. Because whether Flittle and Thistlewit liked to admit it, she was their leader. And if it hadn't been for her, who knew what would have happened to them?

Until recently, they had lived in the Faerie Moors. Once upon a time, they'd known every bog and every glen. They'd known where the snow faeries played and where the stone faeries gathered their rocks. They'd known where to find the best reflection of oneself at different times of day and where to get the perfect flowers for one's hair.

But that was before Maleficent had returned to the Moors, wingless and changed, a dark look in her eye. Though the Moors had never really had a leader before, she'd become the leader now. She scared the living fireflies out of the Fair Folk—Knotgrass, Thistlewit, and Flittle included. There'd been rumors that she'd had a tumultuous relationship with King Stefan at one point, that she wanted revenge for whatever wrong he had done to her. Knotgrass knew that could mean only one thing: another war. And this time, she wanted to be safely away from all the drama, protected in the warm, dry castle.

When the pixies had decided they wanted to make the human world their home, Knotgrass had appealed to Stefan, begging him for asylum, for a place in his court. He had agreed, clearly wanting to please his new wife, Queen Leila, who welcomed them in the court. But he didn't seem all that content with the decision. This was their one chance to get on his good side. And she didn't want to mess it up.



Arriving in the Great Hall, Knotgrass, Flittle, and Thistlewit paused for a moment, overwhelmed by the sight before them. They had never seen the hall so beautiful. The large chandeliers that hung from the ceiling were bright with the light of a hundred candles. On the stone walls, more candles glimmered in gold sconces. The royal thrones had been covered in fine fabric and the wooden armrests had been polished until they shone. Behind the seats, beams of sun burst through the large stained glass windows, turning everything they touched a lovely shade of purple.

Flying over the crowd, Knotgrass led the others to their place at the base of the thrones. They watched as King Stefan and Queen Leila entered

through the huge doors at the back of the room. Knotgrass smiled, hearing the oohs and aahs of the guests as they took in the sight of the beautiful couple. She had to admit, the king and queen *did* complement each other perfectly: Stefan with his dark wavy hair, sun-kissed complexion, and broad shoulders; Leila with her fair skin, blond hair, and small frame. Yes, Knotgrass thought, both so perfect. Yet if the rumors were true, one of them had a secret...a torrid history that could ignite the next war.

Knotgrass shook her head. She was doing it again—getting caught up in the past when the future was unfolding right before her eyes. Focusing her attention back on the royal pair, she saw Queen Leila holding baby Aurora, Stefan close to her side, his expression unreadable. Then the christening officially began.

First the king and queen welcomed their guests, saying how honored they were by the outpouring of love for their daughter. Then a minstrel played a tune and a poet read a sonnet, each praising Aurora and wishing her a long and happy life. Finally, when that was all over, Stefan nodded to the pixies. It was their turn. Showtime.

Taking a deep breath, Knotgrass flew up in front of the bassinet. She smiled down at Aurora. The baby was sleeping peacefully, her blond curls ringing her head like a halo. “Sweet Aurora,” Knotgrass said, her tiny voice echoing through the hall. “I wish for you the gift of beauty.” She reached out and gently touched the baby’s forehead, magic coursing from her fingers onto Aurora. *Yes, that was a wonderful gift, she thought. It will probably be the best gift of all.* Smiling proudly, she turned and signaled to Flittle.

“My wish,” Flittle said when she approached the bassinet, “is that you’ll never be blue, only happy all the days of your life.”

Knotgrass held back a groan. Of course Flittle’s gift would incorporate blue. The pixie was so predictable.

And then it was Thistlewit’s turn. The pixie floated up and over to the bassinet. Staring down at the baby, Thistlewit hummed a tune under her breath. Watching the green-clad faerie, Knotgrass narrowed her eyes. She should have known this would happen. The youngest pixie had not prepared for the christening at all, even though Knotgrass had reminded her over and over again. And now she was making them all look foolish as she stood there, a silly little smile on her face, not saying a word but humming away.

Knotgrass cleared her throat, hoping to get Thistlewit's attention. The pixie didn't look over. Knotgrass cleared her throat again, louder, but still, no reaction. Growing desperate, Knotgrass pulled a small red flower from the hem of her dress and threw it at Thistlewit's feet. Finally, the pixie snapped out of it.

She shrugged apologetically and then turned her attention back to Aurora. The infant still slept, oblivious to all the attention directed at her and her alone. The guests leaned forward, straining to hear the final wish to be bestowed. "Dear baby," Thistlewit said. "I wish you...I wish you..." She stammered, suddenly nervous in front of the crowd.

Knotgrass clenched her fists and her scowl grew deeper. This was horrible! Thistlewit was ruining the pixies' moment! Stefan was probably mortified and Aurora could wake at any moment. Things couldn't get any worse.

And then all the candles went out.



A cold wind began to blow through the Great Hall. Women's headpieces flew off their heads and men's capes whipped wildly around their necks. Thunder rolled. Lightning flashed. In the brief bursts of light, Knotgrass could make out the panicked looks on the faces of the crowd. But they were blurred a moment later when a gray mist rolled into the room.

Knotgrass listened to the thunder and watched the lightning. As she did, a feeling of dread began to lodge itself in her belly. She had seen this type of magic only once before—when Maleficent had returned to the Moors and created a throne for herself out of the dead branches lying around. But it couldn't be Maleficent. She wouldn't come into Stefan's castle, where she would be surrounded by humans. She hated humans. No, there was absolutely no way it was Maleficent. If the faerie *were* here, that would mean they were all in very big trouble.

Suddenly, the lightning and thunder stopped. The candles burst back to life. A moment later, the gray smoke evaporated. And when it was all gone, standing there in the middle of the Great Hall was Maleficent.

The faerie seemed to have grown taller since Knotgrass had seen her last. She wore a long black cape that matched the dark horns protruding from her head. As Maleficent gazed around the room, she raised one perfectly arched eyebrow. In her hand she held a long staff that appeared to be made from the branch of a tree. It was gray and twisted, covered in

knots. And on her shoulder sat the jet-black raven, her new companion. *Robin II*, Knotgrass called him in her head.

Maleficent began to move closer to the king and queen, motivating Knotgrass to take an involuntary step back. Flittle and Thistlewit, their wings flapping nervously, looked over at Knotgrass. She knew what they were silently asking. Why was Maleficent there? Why now? But she didn't have the answers. They were going to have to wait and see.

They didn't have to wait long.

"Well, well," Maleficent said, her voice echoing through the hall.

It had been ages since Knotgrass had heard Maleficent speak. She had forgotten how melodic her voice could be.

"Quite the glittering assemblage," Maleficent went on, her shining green eyes scanning the room. "Royalty, nobility, the gentry, and, how quaint..." She paused, narrowing her gaze at Knotgrass and the other two flower pixies. "Even the rabble."

Rabble? Knotgrass fumed. *That* excuse for a faerie was calling *her* rabble? How dare she? Who did she think she was? Knotgrass took a step forward but was quickly pulled back by Thistlewit. It would do no good to try to attack the dark faerie. She was, even though Knotgrass hated to admit it, stronger and more powerful. Sighing, she scowled, waiting to hear what Maleficent would say next.

Taking in the queen, whose blond hair and freckle-dusted face were in stark contrast to her own long, dark locks and pale skin, Maleficent pulled her lips back in what appeared to be a smile. "I really feel quite distressed at not receiving an invitation."

King Stefan had been oddly quiet up until that point. Knotgrass wondered if he was scared, too. After all, he must have known how dangerous Maleficent could be with her new dark powers. But then he stepped forward, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "You're not welcome here," he said.

"Not welcome?" Maleficent repeated. "Oh dear, what an awkward situation." Turning, she made a move to leave.

Knotgrass smiled. Well, that hadn't been *too* bad. She could have done without the wind and smoke, but all in all, no damage was done.

And then Leila spoke. "You're not offended?" the gentle queen asked. Her kind heart and royal upbringing made it impossible for her to be rude.

Slowly, Maleficent turned back. The look on her face was unreadable and the feeling in the pit of Knotgrass's stomach returned. "Oh, why no,

Your Majesty,” Maleficent said. Her long, thin fingers fluttered above her heart and she began to move toward the bassinet. “And to show you I bear no ill will, I, too, shall bestow a gift on the baby.”

Sensing a gift from Maleficent could never be good, Stefan tried to step in front of the faerie and stop her approach. But she simply raised a finger and a small wind whipped up. Stefan paused, exchanging looks with Maleficent as she swept past him. He seemed to be surprised and disturbed by her power. How Leila could not sense the tension, the *hatred* between the two was beyond Knotgrass.

As Maleficent drew closer to the bassinet, Knotgrass looked frantically back and forth between Maleficent and baby Aurora. She had to do something. She couldn’t let the faerie near the baby. Taking a deep breath, she flew over and put herself between Maleficent and Aurora. Flittle and Thistlewit followed. “Stay away from the princess!” Knotgrass cried.

Maleficent let out a laugh. “Gnats,” she said before flicking them out of her way, one by one. Then she stepped up to the bassinet. Inside, Aurora had awakened. She was looking up, her blue eyes wide with curiosity. Knotgrass watched and waited to see what would happen next. For a moment, Maleficent just stared down at Aurora, an odd look on her face. If Knotgrass hadn’t known any better, she would have said Maleficent looked almost...jealous. But why would she be jealous?

Finally, Maleficent raised her head. Turning around, she addressed the crowd. “Listen well, all of you,” she began. “The princess shall indeed grow in grace and beauty. Beloved by all who know her. But before the sun sets on her sixteenth birthday, she will...” Maleficent paused. Knotgrass watched as the faerie looked about the room, searching for something. Her gaze lingered on one of the gifts brought for Aurora. Smiling, she went on: “...prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall into a sleep like death. A sleep from which she will never awaken.”

The gathered crowd began to whisper, their hushed voices loud in the Great Hall. The queen gasped as Stefan took a step forward. “Maleficent,” he said, his voice full of pain. “Don’t do this. I’m begging you.”

Maleficent cocked her head. “I like begging,” she said. “Do it again.”

There was a tense moment as an unspoken conversation seemed to flow between the king and the faerie. Finally, Stefan sighed. “I beg you,” he said, clenching his jaw.

“All right,” Maleficent said. Then she shrugged her shoulders, which looked barren and odd without the expansive wings attached to them. Maleficent waited one more moment before finally saying, “The princess can be woken from her death sleep, but only by...True Love’s Kiss.” Wind began to blow again as Maleficent started toward the doors. But she was not quite finished. “This curse will last until the end of time,” she added with a pointed look at King Stefan. “No power on earth can change it.”

With her curse bestowed, Maleficent disappeared through the doors.





Night

had fallen.
Yet the sky
was bright as day as hundreds of fires burned throughout the kingdom. King Stefan had given the order. Every spinning wheel, from the smallest to the largest, was to be burned. The king didn't care if it meant that all the spinners across the land would have to spin yarn and fabric by hand. He didn't care if everything would take longer to be made and he didn't care if the quality of his wife's dresses deteriorated. He wanted all the spinning wheels destroyed.

In the Great Hall, Knotgrass nervously eyed King Stefan. She had never seen him so mad before. He had already sent the hysterical queen to her room and now he stood on the steps in front of the thrones, holding Aurora in his arms. His cheeks were bright red and he was shaking. What Knotgrass *couldn't* tell, though she would never dare voice her confusion aloud, was whether he was more upset about the curse or the fact that Maleficent had entered the castle at all. She had seen the way the two of them looked at each other. It was a look that was louder than any scream. It was a look that hinted at a history that was far more complicated than Knotgrass could have imagined. It was a look wrapped up with hate, love, and pain. As if he had betrayed Maleficent and her entire family. Even her dead parents. She thought about asking the king what was really going on. Why Maleficent had taken such a personal interest in his baby. But she

decided she didn't really care. So long as she was safe, warm, and stylish, that was all that mattered. That was when King Stefan gave another order.

"Knotgrass," he said, his voice echoing in the vast, empty hall.

The flower pixie gulped and flew closer. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

The king's eyes narrowed as he looked the tiny faerie up and down. He sighed as though displeased but then went on. "You three are to leave the kingdom at once."

Knotgrass's stomach dropped. Banished from the kingdom? Where would they go? Where could they live? This was her worst nightmare. Then it got worse.

"And you are to take Aurora with you."

Thistlewit and Flittle, who up until that point had been standing quietly by Knotgrass's side, suddenly let out shouts of protest.

"We don't know anything about babies!" Thistlewit cried.

Stefan glared at the pixie. "You *do* know Maleficent, don't you?" he snapped. "You know what she's capable of."

"We can't go up against her," Flittle pointed out.

"That's obvious," Stefan replied. "All you have to do is hide the baby. Take her into the deep woods where she can't be found. Conceal her there until the curse is over. And do not, under any circumstances, use your magic."

"For sixteen years?" Knotgrass asked.

Stefan nodded. "Her mother and I have agreed. This is what must be done to save my child."

Knotgrass sighed. She knew what this meant. It meant sixteen years of having to watch over a child *plus* Thistlewit and Flittle. Because there was no way those two were going to be any help whatsoever. They were barely capable of taking care of themselves. It would be horrible. Unless there was something in it for them... "What do we get in return?" she asked.

King Stefan's face turned an awful shade of purple. His hands started to shake. But it was only when the king started shouting that Knotgrass realized she'd said the wrong thing.

"You will get the satisfaction of serving *your ruler and king!*" He screamed, his booming voice making the pixie's hair blow backward.

Knotgrass resisted the urge to fix her locks. Then she looked into the king's eyes—his cold, dark eyes. She glanced at his fists, which were curled in a threatening manner. Knotgrass began to tremble in fear. And this only seemed to encourage King Stefan.

He stepped closer toward her. “You do want to please the king, don’t you? Because there are certain places for traitors—places I think you will find far less comfortable,” he said menacingly.

Knotgrass moved backward until she was crouching in the corner of the room.

“Yes. Yes, of course, Your Majesty,” she stammered.

Though she’d always sensed a dark side, some inner turmoil, she had never witnessed this side of the king before. She’d always figured he was just a sensitive fellow, broken up about some past decisions, not raving mad and violent. Knotgrass shuddered. King Stefan was terrifying.

Thistlewit and Flittle crouched down next to her, and together they waited to see what King Stefan would say next. Knotgrass expected more yelling. Maybe a threat or two. What she *didn’t* expect was for the king to take the baby and shove her into their arms. Aurora, while only weeks old, was nearly as big as the pixies, and they struggled not to drop her onto the hard stone ground.

“On the day after her sixteenth birthday,” the king said, “bring her back to me. Now tell me. What will you do?”

“Hide the baby,” Flittle answered.

“Until when?” Stefan asked.

“Her sixteenth birthday,” Thistlewit replied, proud of herself for remembering.

But Stefan shook his head angrily. “No! The day *after* her birthday. Say it!”

If the king hadn’t just threatened her, Knotgrass would have rolled her eyes. She didn’t need to be reminded. “The day after her birthday!” she said. “We know! Let’s get on with it.”

Baby Aurora held between them, the three pixies made their way out of the Great Hall. Just as they reached the door, Knotgrass looked over her shoulder. King Stefan wasn’t even watching them go. He was already deep in conversation with the captain of the guards. *I wonder, Knotgrass thought, does he care even the slightest that he won’t see his daughter for sixteen years? Will he miss her? Or will he be too focused on destroying Maleficent to bother?*

She sighed. There was no use wondering what the king would or wouldn’t do. He had given them orders. They had no choice but to follow.



For the next few hours, Knotgrass and the others frantically rushed about, trying to get ready for their sudden departure. Knotgrass felt sick. She didn't want to leave the castle. She loved it there, with its warm beds, delicious food, and over-the-top pageantry. Royal life suited her well. She wasn't cut out for living in the woods again, now cooking and cleaning and, worst of all, not using magic.

But that was the life in store for her now. Stefan had made it clear: magic was out of the question. It could call attention to their hiding spot, and no one could know where they ended up—no one. *So for the next sixteen years*, Knotgrass thought with a sigh, *life is just going to be unbearable.*

When she was done gathering the few things she would be allowed to take with her, Knotgrass went to find Thistlewit and Flittle. It didn't take long. She had tasked them with getting transportation, and found them down at the stables, sitting on the bench of a wagon. In the back, Aurora slept peacefully, nestled in warm blankets.

With a sigh, Knotgrass pulled herself up onto the bench. Then she clucked and snapped the reins and the big horse lurched forward. Moments later, they were making their way under the giant arch that marked the entrance to the castle and crossing the drawbridge. As the horse's pace quickened, Knotgrass turned to get one last look at the castle. It looked the same, but she knew that wasn't the case. Nothing would ever be the same for the royal family.

The odd company continued on for a while. Soon the castle disappeared from view as the road stretched out in front of them. They would eventually have to make their way off the road and into the woods, but for the time being, Knotgrass was content to stay the course. She was just settling into the gentle rocking of the wagon when, suddenly, the horse let out a frightened whinny and took off.

The three pixies were thrown about while, in the back of the wagon, Aurora began to cry. Knotgrass reached down for the reins, but it was no use. They were flapping about wildly. The wagon was out of control!

For a few scary moments, the horse continued to gallop along, his hooves clapping on the hard ground. Aurora's cries grew louder. Thistlewit and Flittle clung helplessly to the side of the wagon. And Knotgrass continued to try to get control of the situation. "Keep her quiet!" she shouted to the other pixies when Aurora let out a wail that spurred the horse still faster. As they went in the back to try to calm the

baby, Knotgrass reached out for the reins again. Her fingers brushed them once, twice, and then finally closed around the warm leather. “Halt!” she cried, pulling back on the reins as hard as her little body would allow.

Gradually, the horse’s pace began to slow. He dropped from a gallop to a canter, then from a trot to a walk. Finally, he stopped.

Knotgrass let out a huge sigh of relief. But then she scowled. This couldn’t happen again. “Get out,” she ordered. The other pixies climbed down out of the back of the wagon. When they were standing in front of Knotgrass, the flower pixie went on. “I can’t do everything,” she said. “I simply asked you to look after the infant.”

“It’s too big for us,” Flittle protested.

“We need a smaller baby,” Thistlewit added.

Knotgrass was about to inform Thistlewit that it was impossible to make the baby smaller when she had an idea. True, she couldn’t make the baby smaller—Aurora had to grow up someday—but she could make *them* bigger! Smiling, she touched a finger to her forehead and said, “Grow!” Then she touched the other two.

There was a rush of magic and the air shimmered. When it cleared, the tiny flower pixies were no longer small. They were the size of regular humans. The only pixie-like aspects about them were their wings and pointed ears. But, Knotgrass told herself, those could easily be hidden from Aurora.

“Now there will be no questions asked,” Knotgrass said as Flittle and Thistlewit gawked at their new bodies. “We are no longer faeries. We are three peasant women raising an orphan child in the wood. So no more flying.”

“No flying?” Thistlewit repeated.

Knotgrass nodded. “And *no* magic!”

Pleased with herself, Knotgrass stepped up into the wagon. The other two pulled their awkward new bodies into the back with Aurora. Knotgrass urged the horse forward, and they resumed their journey. Now they just had to find a home.





They

had been making their way through the woods for hours, looking for a place to call home. Sure, there were some nice spots. They had passed a lovely lake, its shores lined with smooth rocks and a small waterfall cascading down on one end. They had seen several clearings surrounded by tall trees that provided ample shade. There had been a glen surrounded by berry bushes that would have provided plenty of food.

Yet there was not one spot that could provide shelter unless they used magic to create a house. Sure, they'd lived outdoors for many years back in the Moors. But now that they were used to the luxuries of the indoors, they didn't want to go back to that kind of life. It was bad enough they didn't get to live in a castle anymore. Knotgrass was tempted to conjure up a grand home, complete with elegant furniture, large closets, and perhaps even a nursery for the baby. But they were not to use magic. So they remained homeless. It would be a miracle if they found something with four walls and a roof. It was awfully annoying.

Finally, Knotgrass saw a clearing through the thick trees. Could it be? Did she see stones peeking through the brush? The kind that were formed into a home of some sort? *Oh, please be something comfortable. With just a hint of luxury*, Knotgrass thought.

Trying not to get her hopes up, she urged the horse forward. When they arrived in the clearing, Knotgrass let out a sigh of relief. She smiled

bravely at Thistlewit and Flittle.

“I think we’re here,” Knotgrass announced, gesturing toward the glen.

Together, the three pixies climbed out of the wagon and looked around. In the middle of the clearing stood an abandoned cottage. Its roof was covered in dead leaves and the windows were filthy. What once must have been a little garden was overgrown with weeds, and the remains of a clothesline sagged by the far side of the house. Knotgrass sighed. So much for luxury. It wasn’t in the best of shape, but it would have to work. They hadn’t seen any other cottages on the journey, after all.

Knotgrass walked over to the home and gingerly pushed open the front door. Instantly, she sneezed as a wave of dust hit her nose. When her sneezing fit was over, she peered inside.

There was one big room with a long table in the middle of it and a small fireplace in the corner. On the far wall, a set of stairs led up to what Knotgrass imagined was a loft of some kind, and she could make out the door to what had to be the bedroom.

“This will have to do,” she said. “Welcome home, ladies.”



Knotgrass had never been so tired in her entire life. She had never been so dreadfully filthy, either. Not even when they’d lived outside. And now that they were living in the cottage, they wanted to make sure it felt like they were actually living in a cottage, not a box of dirt.

The three pixies had spent the whole afternoon scrubbing and sweeping, washing and wiping. Every surface had been covered in dust. The bedroom downstairs had leaves on the floor, and in the loft upstairs, cobwebs hung from every corner. Talk about disgusting. It had taken all her willpower not to just snap her fingers and magically clean the cottage until it sparkled. But she hadn’t done that. She needed to lead by example and it would do no good to cave so soon after they had arrived.

Finally, when everything was as clean as it was going to get for the time being, Knotgrass headed outside, grabbed the basket, and brought Aurora into the cottage. She placed the baby on a low table underneath one of the windows. Then she went in search of a glass of water. All that cleaning had made her absolutely parched.

Behind her, she heard Aurora cooing and gurgling happily. It was a pleasant sound and Knotgrass found herself smiling. Raising this delightful little thing was going to be easy. Then the baby began to cry.

Knotgrass rushed over to the table, Thistlewit and Flittle following suit. They stood around the basket, looking at the baby in confusion.

“Why is she crying?” Flittle asked.

Knotgrass rolled her eyes. The answer was obvious. Why did she have to be the one to think of everything? “She’s hungry,” she replied. “Give her some fruit.”

The issue dealt with, Knotgrass began to walk out of the cottage. Behind her, Thistlewit and Flittle looked at each other and shrugged. They grabbed an apple, an orange, and a banana from the bowl on the table and plopped all three into the basket with Aurora. Then they, too, walked away.

In her basket, Aurora’s tiny fingers tried to close around the fruit but it was no use. The food was too big. Opening her mouth wide, she began to cry even louder.



Knotgrass was annoyed. She was living in a tiny cottage in the middle of the woods, and sleeping on a rough cot next to Thistlewit and Flittle, who both had the tendency to snore. She hadn’t had a decent meal in hours. And worse still, Aurora would not stop crying.

She had cried when they had given her fruit. She had cried when they had placed a glass of water beside her in case she was thirsty. She had cried when they picked her up. She had cried when they put her down. For a brief, blissful moment, she had stopped crying while they ate their own dinners. But then Aurora had started wailing again and she hadn’t stopped since.

Now it was the wee hours of the morning and Knotgrass’s head was pounding. The others kept looking to her to give them orders, but she had no idea what to do. Not that she would admit that to them.

She had never taken care of a baby in her life, let alone a human baby. She had never realized just how frustrating they could be! What had the king been thinking when he’d forced this task upon them? Did he know it was going to be a special form of torture?

On the cot next to hers, Thistlewit groaned and pulled the covers up over her head. Flittle placed her head under her pillow and let out a muffled scream. Finally, all three of them sat up. Bleary-eyed, they made their way into the main room, where Aurora lay screaming in her cradle.

“Stop crying, baby!” Thistlewit pleaded. “What do you want from us?”

“All she thinks about is herself,” Flittle added.

Thistlewit nodded. “I’m going mad.”

Knotgrass looked down at the little baby, amazed at how something so small could be so loud. And so selfish. She just wanted to get some sleep. If Aurora could stop crying for even a few hours, maybe Knotgrass wouldn’t fantasize about walking out the door and leaving the pixies and the baby behind for good. But she was sure Stefan would find her, and after their last interaction, it was clear she did not want to be on his bad side.

Knotgrass circled the wailing baby, squinting at it with distaste. The problem was she didn’t have the slightest idea what Aurora was crying about.

And wasn’t she supposed to be a *happy* child because of the gift Flittle had bestowed upon her? She must not have done it right—not that *that* was any surprise. Sighing, Knotgrass turned and went back into the bedroom. Thistlewit and Flittle followed shortly after.

The pixies crawled back into their cots, covering their ears. Eventually, Thistlewit and Flittle fell into a restless sleep, their loud snores competing with Aurora’s cries. Knotgrass’s eyes widened and twitched every few minutes. This simply would not do. She needed her beauty sleep, after all.

As the sun began to creep up over the horizon, Knotgrass lay stiffly in bed, every muscle tense. Aurora’s cries were hoarse, but the small princess continued wailing nevertheless. And then, suddenly, the baby grew quiet.

Knotgrass held her breath, waiting. Aurora was probably just catching her breath, she thought. She was going to start again in earnest any minute now. A minute passed. Then five. Then fifteen. Still, no crying.

Curious, Knotgrass got out of bed and quietly tiptoed into the main room. Looking over at the cradle, she could just make out the tiny baby. Aurora was asleep on her back. Her little fingers were closed around her blanket and one thumb had made its way into her mouth.

Knotgrass smiled and began to tiptoe back to her bed. But then she paused. As she looked over her shoulder, her eyes narrowed. The cradle, which earlier hadn’t been moving, was now rocking ever so gently, its motion the key to Aurora’s sleep.

That's odd, Knotgrass thought. How could it rock on its own? She sniffed the air. Something smelled different. Like flowers and earth. Like how the Moors used to smell, actually. Then she shrugged. What did it matter? It was probably just the wind blowing in through the open window. And Aurora was finally asleep—which meant Knotgrass could sleep as well.

Getting into her cot, she pulled the covers up and closed her eyes. They had gotten through the first day. Barely. But they had gotten through it. And without using magic, no less. Now they just had another sixteen years to go.





Time

passed. In the castle, King Stefan waged a losing war against Maleficent. He ordered ironsmiths to craft large plates of solid iron that he placed on his castle walls. Iron, the only thing that could hurt Maleficent, became his obsession. Then he ordered his army to attack the Thorn Wall she'd created to separate the Moors from the human world. But it was useless; the Thorn Wall proved to be impenetrable. Queen Leila slowly withered away, her heart broken beyond repair. The kingdom became a sad place, one divided by massive walls of thorn and iron. No one laughed. No one played.

In the cottage in the middle of the woods, things were very different. The cottage was a place of laughter and life. At least, Aurora laughed—and grew. No longer a tiny baby, the toddler smiled as she wandered about the clearing on a sunny winter day. She giggled as she explored the garden in the spring. In the summer, she laughed as she played with the laundry lying in the basket near the clothesline. She clapped her hands in delight when she spotted a flower budding. With each passing day, she was becoming more charming and more perfect.

While most mothers would be thrilled to have a child like Aurora, Knotgrass, Thistlewit, and Flittle were not most mothers. They weren't

mothers at all, and they acted accordingly. Knotgrass ignored Aurora when she tried to show her drawings of flowers or creatures that looked remarkably like a strange horned figure and a raven. Flittle pretended not to feel it when the little girl tugged at the bottom of her dress, wanting to play. Sitting outside in the afternoon sun, Thistlewit closed her eyes and pretended to sleep when Aurora toddled over and tried to sit in her lap.

When Aurora mumbled her first word, Knotgrass shrugged, and when the princess began to put sentences together, saying odd words like “shadow,” they didn’t even praise her for being such a smart little girl. As long as the princess stayed within the confines of the clearing, her “aunts”—they had decided that was the safest thing to call themselves—didn’t care what she did. They had promised King Stefan they would keep Aurora hidden until the day after her sixteenth birthday. They hadn’t promised to enjoy doing it. And as the years passed, more often than not, Knotgrass found herself chafing at the constraints of living in the middle of the woods.

One afternoon, Knotgrass sat at the table, absently staring at the card game in front of her. She was bored. They had spent the morning giving Aurora a bath, which had resulted in a near flood, since the little girl found it wildly entertaining to splash about madly. Then they had had to pick berries for that evening’s pie, and after that, they had gathered firewood for the upcoming winter. All in all, it had been a rather dull day, and Knotgrass found herself longing for the event-filled days of castle life more and more.

Next to her, Flittle was clearly bored as well. She idly picked at a loose thread on her dress. Soon she grew tired of that and lifted her feet up. “I hate my feet,” she said, waving them in the air. “I had such pretty little feet.”

“I miss my wings,” Thistlewit said, sighing. Then she looked over at Knotgrass hopefully. “Aurora’s sleeping. Can we take our wings out? Just for a little while?”

Knotgrass was quiet for a moment. It had been ages since they had released their wings. “Oh, all right,” Knotgrass said, smiling. “Release them, ladies! Fly!”

Letting out an excited little squeal, Thistlewit scrunched her eyes tight. There was a pop and she craned her neck, eager to see her wings again. Her face fell. Her wings had released, but instead of human-sized ones, two tiny pixie-sized wings fluttered on her back. Next to her, Flittle and

Knotgrass did the same, with the same result.

Taking a step forward, Knotgrass attempted to fly. But it was no use. She was too big and her wings too small. She hovered in the air for a brief moment before crashing to the floor. As she dropped her head into her hands, Thistlewit and Flittle began to cry.

As if on cue, from her room upstairs, Aurora began to cry as well. Knotgrass sighed. The child's sixteenth birthday couldn't come soon enough.



Summer had come to the woods. The trees' branches hung heavy with bright green leaves. Herbs and vegetables filled the garden, creating tidy rows of parsley and rosemary, tomatoes, and peas. At the edge of the clearing, wildflowers appeared almost overnight, their long stems reaching for the sun. Nearly every day was bright and warm, the sky a brilliant blue and the clouds a striking white.

Three-year-old Aurora, who had spent much of the past season cooped up in the house while her aunts did their annual spring-cleaning, was a bundle of energy. She raced between the garden and the cottage. She threw herself down on the ground, oblivious to the grass stains marking her dress, and soaked up the sun. She was absolutely joyous, and the effect was contagious. Even the cranky Knotgrass found herself humming a tune as she worked in the garden one afternoon. And when Aurora asked, in her lilting little voice, if they could go play in the meadow, Knotgrass couldn't say no.

That was how they found themselves, in the middle of the warm afternoon, having a picnic in a large open meadow. Having made themselves comfortable on a plaid blanket, Knotgrass, Thistlewit, and Flittle settled in to enjoy their meal. Behind them they could hear Aurora chattering to herself as she waddled through the tall grass. "Pretty birdy," Knotgrass heard the young girl say. "Pretty, pretty birdy." Looking over her shoulder, the pixie expected to see a bluebird or even a hummingbird. But instead she saw an ugly black raven. The little girl was reaching out toward it, a big smile on her face.

Knotgrass sighed. Aurora could be such a strange child sometimes. This wasn't the first time she had seen her talking to a raven. Knotgrass knew there was little chance it was the same bird, but Aurora always called them the same thing: "pretty." Knotgrass thought of correcting her

on occasion. After all, the bird was anything but pretty. In fact, she remembered, Maleficent had an ugly raven of her own. That proved they were distasteful creatures. But Knotgrass just didn't have the energy to reprimand Aurora. If the little princess wanted to make friends with strange creatures, so be it—as long as it meant she entertained herself and left Knotgrass alone.

Turning her attention back to the others, Knotgrass was just in time to hear Thistlewit let out a yelp. “Ow!” the pixie cried. Then, as Knotgrass watched in confusion, Thistlewit reached out and pulled Flittle's hair.

“Ow!” cried Flittle. In turn, she reached out and pulled Knotgrass's hair.

“Ow!” shouted Knotgrass, holding a hand up to her head. What was going on? Why had they started pulling each other's hair? She had been looking right at Flittle when Thistlewit let out her first cry. Flittle's hands had been full of grapes. There was no way she could have pulled the other pixie's hair. *But if Flittle didn't do it and I didn't do it, Knotgrass thought, who did?*

She opened her mouth to try to get the other two to stop fighting when Thistlewit gave her hair a nasty tug. Her eyes teared and she frowned. That was it. With a roar, Knotgrass lunged to her feet and began pulling hair left and right. In moments, the three were caught up in a full-blown hair-tugging tangle.

As the tugging turned into pinching, out of the corner of her eye Knotgrass saw that the raven Aurora had been playing with earlier had flown right next to them. The bird was cawing wildly and flapping its wings. It was almost as if the raven was trying to tell the pixies something important. *But it's just a silly bird, Knotgrass thought. It can't tell us anything worth listening to.* Reaching out a hand, she tried to shoo the creature away, but it wouldn't move. It hopped between the three of them, cawing loudly. Just as she was about to turn on the bird and start tugging at its feathers, it flew away.

By the time the tugging war ended, the three pixies were out of breath and completely disheveled. It was only then that Knotgrass remembered Aurora. They had forgotten that the little princess was wandering about on her own. Standing up, Knotgrass scanned the meadow. Aurora wasn't by the trees that lined the near side of the grassy knoll. She wasn't by the small stream on the west side or the raspberry bushes on the east side. With a growing sense of dread, Knotgrass turned toward the far side of the

meadow, where the grass dropped off into a rocky, steep cliff. One wrong step could send a three-year-old plummeting over. Her eyes raced along the edge. And then Knotgrass let out a relieved sigh.

Sitting safely away from the cliff's edge, her little legs bouncing happily, was Aurora. Weirdly, it looked like she'd been placed there, as if someone had been concerned for her safety. But Aurora was unbothered by the seemingly mysterious circumstances. All she did was giggle. And

then, clapping her hands together, she said, "Pretty birdy."





Five

years had gone by. Aurora, now a child of eight, grew more and more beautiful by the day. No longer as big a worry to the pixies, she spent most of her days alone, either in the woods just beyond the clearing or, when her aunts insisted that she finally come in, in the loft with the windows open wide. There she had tea with her imaginary companions, talked with the birds, and made colorful drawings. She spent hours making long flower chains out of daisies, doling them out as presents after dinner. More often than not, the pixies were sure to find Aurora among the trees, always smiling, always happy.

For Knotgrass, the human child's attachment to nature was perplexing. Even she, who had grown up in the Moors, where nature was a magical force, didn't like spending that much time among the birds, bees, flowers, and trees. She was much more content to stay in the cottage, dreaming of the day she could return to the castle, or entertaining herself by beating Thistlewit or Flittle at a game of chess.



On one particularly sunny summer day, Aurora spent the entire morning exploring the woods. When she headed back to the cottage for lunch, Knotgrass insisted she spend some time indoors that afternoon. So Aurora climbed up to the loft to play with her favorite homemade dolls.

Honestly, that child is so odd, Knotgrass thought as she watched Aurora take out the large horned figure and the small stuffed raven. *What kind of dolls are those?* Shrugging, Knotgrass headed downstairs, eager to beat the other pixies at a game of chess.

Soon the three pixies sat at the long wooden table in the middle of the cottage. A cloth with poorly drawn checked squares on it had been laid out on the table. A large pile of rough wooden chess pieces was in front of Flittle. Sitting across from her, Knotgrass stared at the pile, frowning. She hated losing. Especially to flighty Flittle. Pointing across the room, she waited for Flittle to turn away and then grabbed a few of her pieces back. But she wasn't quick enough.

"What's this?" Flittle said as she snapped her head around in time to see Knotgrass's fingers close on one of the wooden figures. "You're cheating!"

Knotgrass opened her mouth, pretending to be offended. "I resent the insinuation!" she cried.

"There's no insinuation," Flittle said, shaking her head. "I've caught you in the act. You...you..." She struggled for the worst insult. "You cheating hedgepig!"

"You sulking hen!" Knotgrass shot back.

Flittle's eyes narrowed. It was on. "Strutting peacock!"

"Reeking pantry rat!"

Back and forth they went, shooting insults. It looked as though there was no chance of the war of words ending when, suddenly, a drop of water plopped down on Knotgrass's head. She brushed it away like it was an annoying bug. Then another drop splattered on her forehead. Looking up, she tried to see if there was an obvious leak. Seeing none, she sighed and moved over on the bench.

Plop, plop, plop.

Three more drops landed right on Knotgrass's head. That couldn't be coincidence. It reminded her of something that had happened to them long before in the Moors, a particularly devilish rain cloud. That had to be magic. She shot Flittle a suspicious glare. "Stop doing that," she ordered.

"I'm not doing anything!" Flittle protested.

Plop, plop, plop, plop. More water fell.

“Well, someone is!” Knotgrass snapped.

Flittle shrugged. “Maybe we have a leak in the roof. Did you ever think of that?”

“It can only *leak* if it’s raining.” She gestured outside. Not a cloud floated in the perfect blue sky. “Is it raining?”

Thistlewit, who had up until that point been simply watching the other two in amusement, shook her head. “No.”

Knotgrass nodded. “Exactly. Then it can’t be a leak. You two are having a go at me and I won’t...” Her voice trailed off as more water began to plop down onto her head. Slamming her hands on the table, Knotgrass jumped to her feet. “*Stop it!*” she screamed.

Instantly, the water stopped.

For a tense moment, no one said a thing. They all waited for the drops to resume. But when, after a few minutes, they didn’t, Knotgrass slowly sat down. She looked up to make sure it was well and truly over. The ceiling looked dry. Not a drop to be seen. She smiled.

And then it began to pour.

Water flooded down right on top of Knotgrass, soaking her to the bone. Flittle and Thistlewit began to laugh, only to get hit with a wave of water that appeared to pour down from the stairs. Everyone screamed.

“Who’s using magic?” Knotgrass yelled. “I said *no* magic!”

But it was no use. The rain kept coming, soaking the entire cottage. Someone was using magic. That was clear. But what wasn’t clear was *who*.



A few hours later, Knotgrass stood in front of the clothesline, hanging her dress, and just about everything else from the cottage, out to dry. The random water storm had ended as quickly as it had started. Every nook and cranny of the downstairs was wet, but at least no one had been hurt. Still, the day’s events had raised a worrisome question. If none of the pixies had used magic to create the miniature flood, who had? Because there was no doubt: magic had most definitely been used. And that meant someone, with relatively good control of their powers, was nearby and keen on playing jokes on the three pixies.

As Knotgrass bent down to pick up her waterlogged quilt, she had a terrible thought. What if it was Maleficent? Could the powerful faerie,

with her strong horns and fierce eyes, be watching them? *No*, Knotgrass thought. *Not once in the past eight years has there been any sign of her. I'm just worrying myself over nothing. No one knows we are here. Not the king, not his men, not Maleficent nor her minions.* Plus, what would Maleficent want to do with the pixies or Aurora? What was left to do? She had already done her worst. The curse had been cast and now they were hiding there just awaiting the day when Aurora would either outwit destiny...or not.

No, Knotgrass said to herself once more. *It was probably something else altogether. Maleficent is far away in the Moors. Aurora is safe. And we just have to keep it that way...for another eight years.* If only she would stop going on about her weird imaginary friend. She kept saying she loved the sweet shadow that followed her around. That she wanted to invite it in for tea. Honestly, that child was so strange.



PART THREE



Aurora

raised her nose and inhaled the crisp fall air. Multicolored leaves crunched beneath her feet as she made her way along the edge of a stream. The water had grown icy, and in the afternoon sun it sparkled and twinkled. Reaching out her hand, she gently brushed the top of a cattail. The soft touch caused snow to drift off the plant's feathery leaves and fall, silently, to the ground.

This was one of Aurora's favorite times of the year, when vibrant leaves blanketed the trees and covered the ground. The air took on a hushed quality as the animals prepared themselves for winter. Foxes borrowed deeper into their dens; birds nestled into holes in trees, their little beaks tucked beneath their wings as they awaited spring. The creatures more comfortable in the cold, such as the snow hares and the deer, with their thick fur coats, sought out the sparse blades of grass and winterberries that would keep them fed till spring. It was a season both sleepy and wide-awake.

For nearly sixteen years, Aurora had wandered the woods during every season, finding beauty in each and every tree. Her aunts always teased her, saying she was going to turn into a tree one day if she stayed in the forest

much longer. They warned her that if she wasn't careful, her love of nature could draw the attention of a faerie who might spirit her away to the faerie world. The Moors, they said, were no place for a pretty human girl like her. But while her aunts had expected their warnings to frighten her, they'd had the opposite effect. They had given credence to her belief that there was someone watching over her, a faerie godmother of sorts who lived deep in the heart of the Moors.

In her fantasies, Aurora pictured the Moors as a world full of beautiful and magical creatures who loved nature with the same passion she did. There were faeries of all shapes and sizes. They all had different jobs. Some worked to help plants grow, while others played in rivers, moving rocks and stones to help the water flow. But her faerie godmother was different from all the others. Her only job was to watch over Aurora and keep her safe.

Aurora had first begun to believe in her faerie godmother when she was just a child. It wasn't because she had seen the creature. Quite the opposite. It was always just a perception of a shadow at the edges of her vision. A shadow with horns and a dark cloak that appeared at various intervals. There was the time Aurora had wandered too close to the edge of a cliff during a picnic. She had almost fallen over when she sensed someone behind her, saw the familiar shadow, and, a moment later, found herself safely seated away from the cliff's edge. There were the times, when she was barely old enough to remember, that the shadow appeared in her room and a sense of calm would fill Aurora and she would fall asleep happy. She believed, more than anything, that it was her faerie godmother who loved her most of all, who wanted to make sure her life was a happy one.

It wasn't that she had a bad life. Quite the opposite, really. Her aunts, Knotgrass, Thistlewit, and Flittle, gave her everything she needed. She wanted for nothing. Their home was cozy; there was always food on the table and a warm bed to sleep in. True, her aunts could be a bit cold at times, and on more than one occasion she had gotten the distinct impression that they looked at her as an obligation. But all in all, it was a good life. She was allowed to wander where she pleased—as long as she did not leave the woods. That was strictly forbidden. She had glimpsed a road once, though, through the trees. She rushed home excitedly and asked Knotgrass where it went. Her aunt had grown pale. Then she had told her it led “nowhere good” and that she was never, *ever*, to go back

there. "Promise me," Knotgrass had pleaded. "You must believe me, it's for your own good that you stay away." Aurora had nodded and said, "Of course," and the subject had been dropped.

Yet sometimes, Aurora's mind wandered back to the road, and she found herself making up stories about where it went. She imagined it was a long, long road that led to a great body of water where huge animals played along the shore. Other times, she told her animal friends that at the end of the road was a beautiful castle where a handsome king and his pretty queen lived. This one was partly true. She could see the castle in the distance, a gray, far away mass. But she didn't know who lived there. For all she knew, it could be inhabited by a dragon.

Her favorite fantasy, though, was also the only one tinged with sadness.

In that fantasy, the road led to her mother and father. At the end of its long, twisty path was a small cottage, just like the one she lived in now, and inside, her mother stood by the stove baking a warm berry pie. Her father was in the yard, chopping wood. And when she arrived, out of breath and exhausted, they raced to her and embraced her in their warm arms. And then she had a family.

That fantasy was the hardest. She loved her aunts. She truly did. But as she had grown older, she had begun to wonder more about her parents. On her thirteenth birthday, she had wanted only one present. When her aunts had asked what that present was, she had answered, "I want you to tell me about my mother and father. What happened to them? Are they still alive?" But the aunts had shaken their heads and said they would tell her when she was older.

Now she was nearly sixteen, and still her aunts had shared only one piece of information: her mother and father had died a long, long time ago. She was left with nothing to do but try to imagine what her parents had been like. She pictured her mother with blond hair, just like hers. While hers hung past her waist, her mother's would be shorter, less wavy. Her mother's eyes would be the same bright blue as Aurora's and they would share the same little nose that pointed up ever so slightly at the end. Aurora's pale skin would also be like her mother's, the smattering of freckles the only hint to her father's darker complexion.

While Aurora always imagined she looked just like her mother, she believed her father had given her all her other qualities. From her father, she got her love of nature. Her adventurous and open spirit. He passed

along his willingness to love unconditionally. *Yes*, she would tell herself as she lay in bed daydreaming of her lost family. *If I were to ever meet my father I know we would be one and the same.*

Walking along now, her thoughts once more with the family she had never met, Aurora let out a sigh. She so very much loved her life in the cottage with her aunts. Lately, though, she had found herself growing more and more antsy. It was not just the increasing fantasies of being reunited with her mother and father. It was something more. It was a feeling that there was more for her than a life in the woods. That there were adventures to be had out beyond the trees. That there were people to meet and places to see.

Aurora frowned. But how was she ever going to do that if she wasn't allowed to leave the woods? Her aunts had raised her to avoid strangers. She was to stay by herself and only rely on her aunts for help. They seemed frightened at the very idea of other people. But Aurora was different. She *wanted* to meet new people.

Suddenly, Aurora had an idea. Her aunts had told her not to seek out the road or talk to strangers, but how would they know if she did? They never came with her when she went into the woods, and rarely asked about her day when she returned. That was it! She could just go to the road, see what it was like, and come home. What harm could that possibly do? No one would be the wiser and her curiosity would be quenched—for now. Yes, that was it. She was going to see the road.

Aurora picked up her pace. She needed to get home and tell her aunts she would be out walking for a while. It would do no good to have them in a panic. Especially if she didn't want them asking too many questions. She had never kept a secret from them before and was worried she would tell them her plan if pressed. But as she threaded her way through the trees toward home, a smile spread across her face. She had a plan. And perhaps—just perhaps—what she would see would change her world forever.





Aurora

stood at the edge of the forest, her heart pounding in her chest. It had taken all of her courage to make her way to this point. She had told her aunts she was going to pick berries, grabbed a basket, and then rushed into the woods before giving herself a chance to change her mind. A few short hours and many panicked moments later, she found herself at the edge of the road.

To her dismay, when she had left the woods and stepped into the bright sunshine, she had discovered that the road was just a road. It was brown and dusty, the grass on both sides of it a dull green. It seemed to stretch on forever in either direction, growing wider in places and narrow in others.

In the distance Aurora could make out what looked to be a small bridge, but aside from a lone cow wandering along, there was no one nearby. It was not a beautiful road. Nor was it special in any way.

But as she continued to look at the road, her heart began to thud loudly. The air felt heavy here, as if the area was cluttered with the ghosts and secrets from events long ago. Aurora's heart beat even louder as she looked at what was on the *other* side of the road.

Rising high into the sky was the largest wall Aurora had ever seen. And it was no ordinary wall. It was a wall made completely of thorns. The branches weaved in and out of each other, making it impossible to see through to the other side.

The sun's rays did nothing to brighten the dark and twisted structure. In fact, it seemed just the opposite to her, as though the wall was repelling the warmth. Thorns the size of Aurora pointed out in every direction. Their sharp tips stabbed at the air.

Her eyes wide, Aurora crossed the road and made her way up to the Thorn Wall. Hesitantly, she reached out a finger and gently touched the tip of one of the thorns. She let out a little yelp. Looking down, she saw a single drop of blood welling up on her finger.

Aurora slowly began to walk along the Wall. *Is there something beyond these branches that needs to be protected? And if so, from whom?* Then another fleeting thought flashed through Aurora's mind. What if the Wall had been built not to keep someone out, but rather to keep someone *in*? The thought made her shiver. She had spent all of her life hidden in her woods. This was the closest she had ever come to anything potentially dangerous.

She took a deep breath and looked at the twisting vines more closely. No. The Thorn Wall wasn't scary, nor was it threatening. For some reason, she had the feeling that the Wall wasn't a bad thing. That despite its foreboding appearance, it was just another product of nature. Like the trees that shaded the cottage in the clearing, perhaps this wall was shading someone special on the other side.

Glancing up, Aurora saw that the sky had begun to darken. A storm was on the way, and she needed to get home before her aunts started to worry.

She turned to go but not before taking one last look over her shoulder at the Wall. Perched on the very top was a dark raven. Seeing her, it let out a caw and took to the air, disappearing from view. Aurora smiled. *Yes, she thought, there is more to this wall than just thorns and brambles. And I intend to come back every chance I get until I find out what lies beyond....*



Over the next few weeks, Aurora made good on the promise she'd made to herself. She visited the Wall almost every day. She made her way in the early morning to see what it looked like as the sun rose, the pink hues

casting a gentle glow on the brambles. She wandered over as the sun sank beneath the horizon and marveled as the Wall went from black to orange before turning black once more. She visited at midday, hoping to catch a glimpse of life beyond the thorns. But she never saw anyone or anything. It was always just the Wall and the empty road.

Despite her optimistic nature, Aurora began to think that maybe there was nothing to the Wall after all. That it was just what it looked like: a way to separate the kingdom from whatever lay beyond.

Still, Aurora couldn't stay away.

On one particularly beautiful, sunny afternoon, she stepped out of the shadows of the woods. Glancing over her shoulder, she checked that her aunts hadn't followed her. They had been growing more protective of late.

Aurora thought it was ironic, as she was going to be sixteen in a matter of months. She was no longer a child, yet more and more, her aunts treated her like one. Telling her to stay close. Asking her where she was going when she was just setting out to hang the laundry. They had even taken to checking in on her at night, making sure she was tucked in bed. It was as though they thought she would just up and leave them. Part of Aurora chafed at this sudden protectiveness, but another part was touched. Her aunts just loved her very much. Perhaps they were just beginning to realize that she was growing up and didn't want to let go of their little girl.

Still, it would do no good for them to discover her visits to the Wall—which was why she was always careful to take a different route whenever she left the cottage, and why she now made sure they weren't behind her. Satisfied she was alone, Aurora crossed the road.

White clouds drifted slowly through a bright blue sky. In the woods behind her, Aurora could hear the birds calling to one another. By the Wall, though, the sounds of nature seemed muted. Aurora gently placed her hand on one of the thick branches. She had learned to avoid the sharp thorns after her first encounter with the Wall. The branch was warm from the sun. It seemed to pulse under her fingers, and Aurora thought, not for the first time, that the Wall was alive.

She smiled to herself. It was a silly thought, she knew, but it made her feel safer in some strange way. On occasion, Aurora had even thought she could hear the Wall talking to her, calling her closer. It was as though it were willing her to find a way to the other side.

Standing on her tiptoes, Aurora squinted and peered through the branches. She had tried countless times, but she was never able to see

what was on the other side. Today was no different. With a sigh, she dropped down and began to walk slowly along the Wall's edge, lost in thought.

Suddenly, a loud screech filled the air, startling Aurora. Looking around, she tried to determine where the noise was coming from. The road behind her was empty. To her left and right were the woods and the Wall. The noise couldn't have come from either of those places. It sounded horrible, like metal on metal. The noise grew louder and louder. It was coming from somewhere ahead. Picking up her pace, Aurora began to move forward.

The road bent to the left, and suddenly, in the distance, Aurora could make out a wagon and several men in heavy armor. The wagon appeared to have broken down.

She stopped in her tracks. Her heart beat furiously. Aurora didn't know what to do. It looked like the men needed help. But her aunts had warned her that men could be dangerous and clever. They had always said to run straight home and tell them if she encountered strangers. "You cannot trust anyone out there, especially men," they'd warned. "Men are full of traps." What if *this* was a trap?

Aurora sighed. But what if it wasn't and they truly did need her help? She couldn't just turn and go back to the cottage as though nothing had happened. Sure, her aunts wouldn't be happy if they knew she was approaching strangers. But they wouldn't be happy knowing she'd ventured this far from home, for that matter.

Aurora's mind was racing. She needed to make a decision: show herself or disappear. Either way, the time to act was now. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and started to call out....

And then her nose twitched as a strange scent suddenly filled the air—a soothing mixture of honey, flowers, and soil. A moment later, her eyes grew heavy, and before she knew what was happening, Aurora sank to the ground, hearing the sounds of horses charging and men shouting.

A plethora of questions flooded her mind. What was going on? Were the men attacking the Wall? Was she dreaming? Aurora rapidly lost consciousness and fell into a deep sleep.





Aurora

felt like she was floating. She heard muffled voices and her eyelids fluttered open. Above, she saw a full moon hanging bright in the sky. She could make out trees on both sides of her and the shadow of a large bird. Opening her mouth, she tried to speak, but the effort was too great, and after a moment, sleep claimed her once more.

Strange dreams overtook her. Dreams about the sweet shadow figure she'd known all her life. The shadow had a pet dog...or was it a pet wolf by her side? And she was at the Wall, keeping a whole army of invaders out. Aurora knew she should be scared, but she wasn't. In her mind's eye, she merely watched calmly, floating over the scene, knowing the shadow and the wolf would be okay.

She awoke sometime later, this time feeling less groggy. Slowly Aurora sat up and looked around. She was in the middle of a glen. Trees surrounded her on all sides, and nearby, water bubbled in a small stream. In many ways, it looked like her clearing in the woods. But in many other ways, it did not.

The trees seemed older, their branches thick with dark green leaves. The air smelled crisper. The grass underneath her felt softer and Aurora

had the distinct feeling that the glen was alive, similar to how she'd felt whenever she'd touched the Thorn Wall, only magnified. In that moment, Aurora knew without a doubt she was no longer in the human world. But if that was the case, where was she?

Sensing a presence behind her, Aurora was reminded of something. What was it? Suddenly, she felt warmed by a burst of clarity, as if a cloud had shifted to reveal a shining sunbeam. She smiled knowingly. There could be only one explanation for how she had gotten to this magical glen. "I know you're there," she said softly. "Don't be afraid."

There was a moment of silence and then, from somewhere behind her, a voice replied, "I'm not afraid."

Aurora nearly clapped her hands together in excitement. "Then come out," she urged.

"Then *you* 'll be afraid," the voice said.

"No I won't," Aurora said, shaking her head. How could she be? If she was right, the shadows of the trees hid the one person she had waited her whole life to meet.

As she watched, the trees rustled, and a moment later, a figure stepped out into the middle of the glen. Aurora's eyes grew wide. Standing in front of her was a faerie. In nearly every way, she looked human. She was tall and thin, with long dark hair and luminous, pale skin. Her lips were ruby red and her heavily lidded green eyes gazed at Aurora hesitantly. But on top of her head was a pair of large, dark horns. The same dark horns that Aurora had seen in the shadows for so many years.

"I know who you are," Aurora said, getting to her feet.

The faerie took a step closer. She raised one eyebrow. "Do you?" she asked.

Aurora nodded. "You're my faerie godmother," she replied.

A smile tugged at the corner of the faerie's lips. "Your...what?"

Aurora could see that the creature was trying hard not to laugh, but she didn't care. She knew it was true. "Faerie godmother," Aurora repeated. "You've been watching over me my whole life. I've always known you were close by."

Her words seemed to surprise the faerie. "How?" she asked.

Aurora pointed at the ground behind the faerie. In the bright moonlight, the faerie's shadow stretched out behind her, the horns distinct. "Your shadow," she replied. "It's been following me ever since I was small. Wherever I went, your shadow was always with me."

A sudden caw made Aurora look up and her eyes widened. A big black raven had flown into the glen. With another caw he landed on the faerie's shoulder and stared at Aurora with his beady black eyes. The bird had been as much of a shadow as her faerie godmother. A memory of lying in her crib giggling as the bird rocked the bed back and forth flooded Aurora's mind and she laughed. "I remember you!" Walking slowly over, she reached out and gently rubbed the raven's feathers. "Pretty bird."

As she stood there, next to her faerie godmother, Aurora saw the bushes at the edge of the clearing rustle. A moment later, a small faerie, its translucent wings fluttering furiously, appeared in the glen. Aurora's eyes grew wide. Then another faerie appeared, and another.

Within moments, the glen was full of faeries. They ranged in size, some no bigger than a stone, others the size of a fern. Some had blue wings, while others had clear ones. There were females and males and older faeries and younger ones. But not one looked like her faerie godmother.

A huge smile spread across Aurora's face as she gazed upon the magical creatures. *The Moors* were what lay beyond the Wall. The beautiful, fantastical Moors! How had she not realized it till now?

Turning to her faerie godmother, she reached out a hand. The tall, striking faerie stepped back, avoiding the gesture. But Aurora was not deterred. "I've always wanted to come here," she said. "But my aunts told me it was forbidden." Then a thought occurred to her. "How did we get through the Wall?"

Her faerie godmother shook her head. "It's time to take you home," she said in way of answer.

Aurora opened her mouth to protest. "So soon?" she asked. "May I come back another night?" Aurora didn't want to go home yet. She wanted to stay and meet all the other creatures in this world. But she could see that her faerie godmother would need convincing. The faerie's green eyes were cautious and she seemed to have grown paler.

Aurora wanted to ask why visiting made her so upset. She wanted to assure the faerie that she wouldn't tell her aunts, that it would be their secret. But before she could utter a word, her faerie godmother reached into her pocket, pulled out a yellow flower, and gently blew on it so its sweet pollen flew toward Aurora.

The familiar floral smell wafted up to her nose. Once again, a strong sleepy feeling overtook Aurora. She struggled against the sensation, but it

was no use. A moment later she sank to the soft ground, which cushioned her like an earthy blanket. Her last conscious thought was that somehow she would come back to this world and spend as much time as she could with her faerie godmother.



Aurora woke the next morning and glanced around her small bedroom. She almost expected to see the large raven sitting on the window ledge, cawing at her in his friendly way. But the ledge was empty and Aurora's heart sank. Had she dreamed it all? Had she actually just been in bed this whole time, not in the beautiful glen among all those wonderful faeries?

Her eyes fell on her shoes, which lay beside the bed. A fine layer of yellow dust covered the tips. Letting out a sigh of relief, she smiled. No, she hadn't dreamed it. She had gone beyond the Wall and met her faerie godmother. And she couldn't wait to go back.

Aurora spent the rest of the day in a haze, reliving the evening's events over and over again in her mind. What an incredible haven the Moors had been. Even more majestic and perfect than she'd imagined. While she wanted to go back to the Moors, she didn't know how that would be possible. She didn't remember getting through the Wall, which meant she couldn't retrace her steps. And she didn't know how to get in touch with her faerie godmother to ask for her help.

As the hours passed, a feeling of dread began to grow in Aurora's stomach. What if that had been it? What if she was never allowed to walk in the breathtaking faerie world again? And, even worse, what if she never got to see her faerie godmother again? The thought made her sick.

For so long, her faerie godmother had been just a wish, a hope that there was someone out there who cared about her unconditionally. That there was someone out there who truly loved her.

True, her aunts took care of her, but Aurora had never been able to shake the feeling that they looked at her as a chore. She loved them dearly, of course. But she didn't want to be a burden to anyone. And now she had met someone she believed didn't look at her as a task. Someone who could possibly be a friend. And there was a chance she would never see her again.

By the time Aurora crawled into bed that night, she was a mess of emotions. She tossed and turned, trying to stop the negative thoughts from racing around her mind. She recalled some of her earliest memories of the

horned shadow standing over her bed, its peaceful presence lulling Aurora to sleep. If only her faerie godmother would come now!

Finally, Aurora forced herself to stop wallowing in sadness. What she needed was a plan of action. She decided she would just have to go back to the Wall in the morning and shout for her faerie godmother for as long as it took. While it wasn't the most surefire plan, Aurora started to feel better.

Just when Aurora was starting to fall asleep, a small gust of wind blew through her room. A moment later, her faerie godmother appeared in the window.

Aurora sat up eagerly, taking in the sight of the beautiful faerie in front of her. This was *real*. She was really here! Putting a finger to her lips, the faerie once more reached into her cape and pulled out the now familiar yellow flower. Aurora smiled widely. It looked like she got to go back after all.





Aurora

had never been happier. Every day she went about her chores, cleaning the cottage, picking vegetables in the garden. And every night she frolicked among the faeries. Her godmother had told her all about the world they lived in. The Faerie Moors, she explained, was a place of great magic and incredible beauty. Nature was the center of the world, every creature working to ensure that trees grew bigger, plants bloomed brighter, and water ran sweeter.

With each passing night, Aurora learned more and more about the world. She met a family of wallerbogs, tiny brown creatures with sad droopy eyes that lived in the peat bogs. These creatures used their slobber to create mud to keep the bog healthy. While not the prettiest of beings, they were incredibly playful, as Aurora soon discovered. On more than one occasion, she got caught in the middle of a mud fight that left her laughing and covered in grime.

Aurora watched in awe as water faeries skated along the top of a pond, their little feet leaving barely a ripple on the surface. Aurora laughed when the beautiful creatures stopped suddenly to admire themselves in the water's reflection, running their hands through their long hair, which

mimicked the grasses of the pond. Vain little things that somehow reminded her of her aunts, they seemed to love Aurora and would show off for hours, diving down to the depths of the pond only to fly up and out a moment later. Aurora would clap and then glance over her shoulder to see her faerie godmother watching her with a bemused expression on her face. She seemed surprised by the ease with which Aurora settled into life in the Moors.

It didn't surprise Aurora. She felt at home in the Moors in a way she had never felt in the cottage. It was the same feeling she got whenever she was in the woods by the cottage, only heightened. In the Moors she felt more in tune with nature, more at peace with herself. She began to see the world as two parts—the human and the faerie. And she began to realize that perhaps her true place was in the faerie part rather than the human one.

With every night that passed, the feeling that she and her faerie godmother were meant to be together grew stronger as well. At first, the faerie had seemed reluctant to have Aurora in the Moors. She had kept her distance as Aurora made friends with the other faeries. She had hesitated to introduce Aurora to the stone faeries, with their tough gray skin and big hearts. Her faerie godmother had hemmed and hawed when Aurora first asked to venture beyond the glen.

Yet slowly, as the moon waxed and waned, Aurora sensed a definite shift in her faerie godmother's feelings. She sensed—because her faerie godmother would never dare tell her—that the faerie had closed her heart years earlier. Now she was slowly opening it. And Aurora couldn't be happier. The faerie no longer walked two steps ahead as they explored the meadow where snow faeries frolicked. She didn't roll her eyes every time Aurora asked what type of plant that was or what that tree was called. Instead, she began to go out of her way to show her all the beauty of the Moors. And Aurora could tell her godmother loved this beautiful place as much as she did.

Every night there was a new place to visit. The Moors seemed endless to Aurora. There were hundreds of lakes and dozens of beautiful glens. There was a huge precipice that she and her faerie godmother would sit on for hours as the stars grew brighter in the sky above. There was the Faerie Mound, where her godmother lived. Then there was the Wall itself, which loomed over the Moors, a constant reminder that the two worlds did not coexist.



Those were, for Aurora, the best days of her young life. She loved the Moors. She was fascinated by every creature she met. And most importantly, she adored her faerie godmother. She no longer saw her as the horned shadow of her childhood. She was now Aurora's friend and confidante. The only thing that saddened her was that every night, despite her protests, her faerie godmother would pull out a yellow flower, blow on it, and put her to sleep.

She would wake in the morning, the covers tucked up around her chin, her aunts none the wiser that she had been gone for the greater part of the night.



The air had grown colder. Fall had given way to winter, and Aurora continued going to the Moors. Her faerie godmother continued to teach her new things every night, and with each visit, they grew closer.

And then, overnight, Aurora sensed a change in her faerie godmother.

She noticed as they made their way up a hill one starry night. While never overly chatty, her faerie godmother seemed even quieter than usual. She kept looking at Aurora, as though about to speak, only to glance away quickly. Confused, Aurora began rambling about everything and anything. Finally, noticing a dew faerie flitting between the petals of a nearby flower, Aurora asked, "Do all of the Fair People have wings?"

Her godmother didn't respond for a moment and Aurora wondered if she had said something wrong. Finally, the faerie said, "Most do."

"Then why don't you?" Aurora asked curiously.

The faerie stopped and looked Aurora in the eye. "It's not anything I wish to talk about," she responded, her voice icy.

Aurora hadn't heard her godmother's voice that cold since the night she had first met her, when the faerie had been desperately trying to stay hidden. Yet despite the bad feeling in her gut, something made Aurora plunge ahead. "I'm just curious because all the other faeries have wings and—"

"Enough!"

Her faerie godmother's shout scared Aurora silent. Bowing her head, she began to walk on. For a long, awkward moment, neither spoke. Aurora could feel her godmother's gaze. Looking up, she saw the hard look leave the faerie's face. Her eyes softened and then, in a quiet voice, laced with pain, she said, "I had wings once."

Instantly, Aurora was no longer upset. Now she was excited. It was rare for her faerie godmother to open up about her past. Trying not to act overly eager, Aurora held her breath and waited for the faerie to go on.

“They were stolen from me,” her faerie godmother said. Then she shot Aurora a look. “And that’s all I’ll say about it.”

Aurora wanted more. Who had taken them? Why would someone do something to cause the faerie such great pain? But she knew better than to push it. So instead, she asked the safer questions. “What color were they?” she asked. “How big?”

Turning her head, the faerie stared off into the distance. A small smile broke upon her face as if she was remembering a happier time long ago. “So big,” she said, “they dragged behind me when I walked. And they were strong. They could carry me above the clouds and straight into the headwinds. They never faltered. Not even once.” She swallowed, the memories clearly painful. “I could trust them.”

As the faerie’s voice faded, Aurora felt a pang in her chest. She had never stopped to think what had made her godmother the way she was. She knew the faerie was not the warmest of creatures. It had taken Aurora months to get her to open up. And she had always sensed something bad must have happened to make her godmother keep others at a distance. But until now, she had never really seen the faerie upset. And she wasn’t just upset. Aurora saw a deep pain etched across the faerie’s face. A pain as fresh now as the day someone had taken her godmother’s wings.

Slowly, Aurora reached out and took her godmother’s hand. She squeezed ever so gently. In that squeeze she hoped to say the words she could not say aloud: *I love you, Faerie Godmother. And you can trust me, too. Always.*





“Aurora,

there is something I need to tell you.”

Several days had passed since her faerie godmother had told Aurora about her wings. During that time, neither of them mentioned the conversation. Aurora didn't want to hurt her faerie godmother by bringing it up again. But she did continue to ask her faerie godmother questions about the Moors and her faerie godmother continued to answer them. Still, Aurora couldn't help feeling as though there was something more the faerie wanted to tell her. Something important. Which was funny, because Aurora had something important to share with her faerie godmother, too. Something she couldn't wait to tell her. But now it seemed her godmother was going to share what was on her mind first.

“Yes?” she said.

Her faerie godmother stopped, her breath visible in the cold night air. Snow had fallen, blanketing the hills in white and making every sound muted. Turning, she looked down at Aurora, her expression unreadable.

Aurora wished, not for the first time, that she could know what the faerie was thinking when she looked at her. Did she see a pesky human? An outsider? Or did she see her for who she was? A girl who simply loved

the Moors.

The faerie seemed to struggle for her words. “There is evil in the world,” she finally said. “I cannot keep you safe from it.”

Aurora smiled. *This* was what had her faerie godmother so upset? The idea that she couldn’t protect her? Did the faerie think that just because she had had her wings stolen, she couldn’t help Aurora? It was a silly thought. Her faerie godmother had watched over her for her entire life. And there was the little fact that she was no longer a child. “I’m almost sixteen, Godmother,” she said. “I can take care of myself.”

The faerie shook her head. “But that’s not—”

Aurora cut her off. She couldn’t wait any longer. She had to say what had been on her mind since she woke up that morning. She had lain there for hours, thinking as the sun rose higher and higher in the sky. Aurora had tried to remember every bit of the conversation she had had with her faerie godmother. She remembered the look of pain in the faerie’s eyes as she had spoken of her stolen wings. She remembered the longing in her godmother’s voice as she had spoken of trust. She remembered the feel of the faerie’s hand in hers and how it had squeezed hers ever so slightly before pulling away. And it was then that she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she had to move to the Moors.

She had found a home in the Moors. A place she loved with all her heart. And she had found family in her faerie godmother. The decision had been an obvious one.

Now, looking into her faerie godmother’s eyes, she smiled. “I have a plan,” she said. “When I’m older, I’m going to live here with you. And then we can look after each other.”

For a moment, the faerie didn’t say a thing. Then a smile spread across her face. “You don’t have to wait until you’re older,” she said, her voice excited. “You could live here now.”

Aurora raised a hand to her heart. Now? She hadn’t thought the move would happen so quickly. There were things she had to take care of first. And there was the small matter of the three women back at the cottage. “My aunts would never let me.”

Her godmother raised an eyebrow. “I thought you could take care of yourself.”

“I can,” Aurora protested. “But they would be sad without me.” Then she paused as an idea came to her. “Could they come and visit?”

Her faerie godmother took a step back, as though shocked. She narrowed her eyes, and for a moment, Aurora was sure she would say no. It was a big request. Aurora knew that. Her faerie godmother was hesitant to let strangers into the Moors and her aunts were definitely strangers. But then, just when Aurora thought all hope was lost, the faerie nodded. “Yes,” she said.

Aurora let out a delighted squeal. “Then I will!” she shouted. “I’ll sleep in a tree and eat berries and black nuts and all the Fair People will be my friends. I’ll be happy here for the rest of my life. I’m going to tell them first thing tomorrow.”



Aurora was a bundle of nerves. She was going to tell her aunts the news that very afternoon, but first she wanted to practice her speech. She didn’t want them to have a chance to talk her out of it, so she needed to be persuasive and clear. With little privacy in the cottage, Aurora had headed into the woods as soon as she was done with all her chores.

Now she walked along, talking under her breath. “It is what I want, Aunties. I have never asked you for anything in my entire life, but I am asking you now. I want to be in the Moors. I will be safe there. My faerie godmother will take of me...” Aurora shook her head. Maybe she shouldn’t mention her godmother. She could just see Knotgrass rolling her eyes and mumbling something about her overactive imagination. No, she would stay away from that topic.

“Aunties,” she began again. “I’m almost sixteen and I need a life of my own. I love you very much but it’s time...”

Her voice trailed off as she heard the sound of hoofbeats. Ducking behind a large tree, she pressed herself flat against the rough bark, her heart pounding. A moment later she heard the sound of bushes rustling and then a voice. A very masculine-sounding voice. “Is someone there?” the voice called out.

Cautiously, Aurora peered around the tree. Immediately, she snapped back, her heart pounding. A young man was in the clearing. Curiosity getting the better of her, she once more peeked out. This time, the man saw her.

“Hello,” he called out.

Aurora gulped. She had never been this close to a man before, not even when those soldiers had called out to her near the Wall of Thorns so

many months before. Her face felt flushed and her heart felt as though it were about to burst out of her chest. For a moment, she thought of bolting in the opposite direction and racing home to the cottage. But then the man called out again.

Slowly, Aurora stepped away from the tree. Nervously wringing her hands, she took a closer look at the young man. He was walking toward her, holding the reins of a huge white horse in one hand. The other rested on the hilt of a sword. He had a long cloak on that looked to be made of rich fabric and his leather riding boots looked supple and polished.

But it wasn't his outfit that mesmerized Aurora; it was his face. She had never seen anyone so handsome, so comfortable and confident, in all her life. The young man had hair the color of nutmeg. His amber eyes were kind and his lips full. As she stared at him, he smiled and she noticed a little dimple in his right cheek.

"Sorry to bother you," he said, "but I'm on my way to the castle and I've become hopelessly lost. Can you help me?"

As he came closer, Aurora's heart beat faster. Why was she feeling this way? He was just a person. And yet she had this strange feeling in her stomach, as though it were full of butterflies. Flustered, Aurora stepped back. But her foot caught on a rock and she stumbled. With a yelp, she fell to the ground.

Immediately, the young man raced over, leaving his grazing horse behind him. "I'm so sorry," he said. "That was my doing. I frightened you. Forgive me." He reached out his hand and offered it to Aurora.

On the ground, Aurora tried to collect herself. She was being ridiculous. She had seen magical creatures and played in the Moors, for heaven's sake. She had experienced many magical and unbelievable encounters in her young life. This was just a man—nothing more. Taking a deep breath, she put her hand in his and let him gently pull her to her feet.

"It's that way," Aurora said when she was standing. The man nodded absently. He was staring at her and Aurora wondered if she had said the wrong thing. "The castle," she clarified. Once again, the man just nodded. It seemed he was now the one who had lost the power of speech. Aurora was glad she wasn't the only one who seemed to be having trouble forming a sentence. It was sort of sweet to see him so flustered. She smiled encouragingly. "What's your name?"

“Phillip,” he finally said, shaking his head as though to clear his vision.

Aurora smiled more broadly. They were getting somewhere. “Hello, Phillip.”

“What’s yours?” he asked, returning the smile.

“Aurora.”

Around them, the sounds of the forest seemed to fade. It was as though they were the only two people in the whole world. In that moment, she realized that she was feeling something altogether new—something that made her warm all over. She had read stories about this feeling, so she knew what it was in an instant: she was smitten. And judging from the dazed look in his eyes, Phillip was smitten as well.

“Well, thank you for your help,” he said, breaking the moment. “And once again, my apologies for being a clumsy fool.”

“You’re forgiven,” Aurora said softly.

Phillip nodded. “Good. That’s good. I’d, uh, I’d best be off, then.” He let out a whistle, and his horse trotted over. Aurora watched as he patted his horse affectionately. Then, in one fluid motion, Phillip pulled himself into the saddle.

Suddenly, Aurora felt panicked. She had only just met Phillip and now he was leaving. What if she never got to see him again? Nervously, she asked, “Will you be back this way?”

A huge smile spread across Phillip’s face. “Nothing could stop me.”

Aurora let out a relieved laugh. “Then I’ll see you soon.”

“Very soon,” Phillip replied. Then he gripped the reins tightly, squeezed his horse’s sides, and galloped off.

Behind him, Aurora waved good-bye. She kept waving until he had disappeared from view. Then she slowly lowered her hand. *Well*, she thought, *that was interesting*. Phillip. Handsome, kind, gentle Phillip. She couldn’t wait to see him again.

And then she remembered. She was going to live in the Moors, forever. She would never see Phillip again. How could she? Maleficent would never let him over the Wall to visit, and Aurora was not planning on returning to this world.

She let out a sigh. Well, it had been a lovely moment. But that was all it could be. She had a whole lifetime of amazing moments ahead of her, living where she belonged. Handsome men would have to be forgotten.





The

morning before Aurora's sixteenth birthday dawned bright and sunny. Sitting up, she stretched and took a long look around her loft bedroom. This was it: the last morning she would wake up in this bed. The last morning she would see the familiar dresser with its odds and ends piled on top. The last morning she would watch as the sun rose over the horizon, bathing the room in a beautiful glow.

For a moment, she felt a pang of sadness at the thought of leaving. Then she smiled. Her faerie godmother was waiting in the woods just outside the clearing. In only a few hours, she would leave with her to go live in the Moors. Her new bedroom would be a magical glen and her new dresser would be the stump of an ancient tree. It was all she ever wanted.

Aurora jumped out of bed and hurriedly threw on her dress. There was one more thing to do before she left for good. She still had to tell her aunts the news.

When she had arrived home the evening before, the ladies had been engrossed in a game of checkers. After trying to get their attention for a while, Aurora gave up and went to her room. She'd decided it would be better to tell them in the morning, anyway. They could be a bit cranky and

dramatic when they were tired.

Knowing that her aunts were probably still sound asleep (they enjoyed sleeping in most mornings), Aurora decided to start breakfast. That way, she could tell them about her plan over a nice, warm meal. She raced down the stairs into the cottage's main room. Much to her surprise, her aunts were already there. And judging by their moody glares, their hunched shoulders, and their clenched fists, they were already in the midst of a gigantic argument. Knotgrass's face even had a distinct blue tinge for some reason.

Aurora hesitated. The tension in the room couldn't be about something as silly as a game of checkers, could it? But then she shrugged. Her aunts could be strange sometimes. And now that she saw all three of them standing there, she couldn't wait to tell them her news. Aurora stepped forward. Knotgrass, Thistlewit, and Flittle all froze and turned to look at her. "I need to talk to you about something," she announced.

"Anything, lovie," Flittle said distractedly. "What is it?"

Aurora looked at her aunts. Knotgrass, with her forehead always wrinkled in worry. Thistlewit, with her kind eyes, and Flittle, with her sweet temperament. She loved them all so much. This was going to be one of the hardest things she had ever done.

Taking a deep breath, she began. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, and please don't be sad, but I'll be sixteen tomorrow and so..." Her voice faltered. "And so..."

"Yes?" Thistlewit prompted.

"I'm leaving home," Aurora said in a rush.

Silence filled the small cottage. The seconds dragged on, turning into minutes. And then, just when Aurora thought no one would say anything ever again, Knotgrass erupted.

"The hell you are!" she screamed, her face turning bright red beneath the blue. "I didn't suffer all these years in this miserable hovel with those two imbeciles so you could ruin it on the last day! We are taking you back to your father—" Knotgrass slapped a hand across her mouth. Her eyes bulged. She had clearly said too much.

"My father?" Aurora said softly. "You told me my parents were dead."

Flittle walked over and put a gentle hand on Aurora's back. "You'd better sit down," she said, ushering her into a chair. "There's something you should know..."

As Aurora sat in stunned silence, her aunts—if she could even call them that anymore—told her the whole story. She was a princess. Her parents were King Stefan and Queen Leila, and they lived in the big castle at the end of the road.

They told her what a beautiful couple the king and queen were, and how the whole kingdom had rejoiced the day she had been born. There had been a celebration in her honor and all the finest people in the land had come bearing gifts.

“And your father asked us to give you the most special gifts of all,” Knotgrass explained.

“Yes, the most special,” Flittle agreed. “We were each to give you one gift. I gave you the gift of happiness.” She smiled proudly. “And you *have* been happy, haven’t you?”

Aurora nodded absently. Right now, all she felt was numb.

“I gave you the gift of beauty,” Knotgrass went on. “And I must say, you are the most beautiful girl in all the land.”

“So you see, it was such a wonderful day,” Flittle said.

“But what about you, Thistlewit?” Aurora asked. “What gift did *you* give me?”

The three pixies exchanged nervous glances.

“Well,” Aurora pressed. “What was it?”

Thistlewit sighed. “I didn’t have the chance to give you my gift,” she said sadly. “Maleficent gave you the final gift.”

Aurora cocked her head. “Maleficent?” she repeated. She had never heard that name before.

And that was when she learned the worst of all the truths. She had been cursed. By a dark faerie who hated King Stefan and wanted to harm his family, Knotgrass claimed. This faerie had arrived in the middle of the celebration, putting a damper on all the festivities. Then the wicked faerie had decreed that on her sixteenth birthday, Aurora would fall into an endless sleep....

Knotgrass finished speaking and looked over at Aurora. The girl’s face was ashen and her hands were shaking. Her whole life had been a lie. Her aunts weren’t actually her aunts. They weren’t even human. They were pixies from the Moors. Her home wasn’t actually the cottage; it was the castle at the end of the road. And she wasn’t an orphan. She had a mother and a father.

“That is why we brought you here,” Knotgrass added, trying to find a way to cheer her up. “To keep you out of harm’s way. We’ve done our best. But that is why you *must* stay here until the day after your birthday. It’s the only way we know to keep you truly safe. So, Aurora, we really must insist...”

But her voice trailed off as she looked down at the now empty chair. Aurora was gone.



Aurora ran as fast as she could out of the cottage and into the woods. Her heart was pounding and she was sick to her stomach. She wanted to cry and scream.

How could this be happening? Just a few hours earlier she had been so full of happiness. Now everything was different. It felt like her world had been turned upside down. She needed to talk to somebody she trusted. Somebody who would not mince words to try to make her feel better.

“Faerie Godmother!” Aurora shouted, bursting into a small glen. “Faerie Godmother!”

The bushes parted, and out of the shadows of the trees, her godmother appeared. “I’m here,” she said, stepping toward Aurora, her face filled with concern.

But the girl held up a hand. She couldn’t bear to be touched or coddled at the moment. Right now, all she wanted was the truth. She had to hear it from her faerie godmother. If anyone would tell Aurora the truth, it was she.

“When were you going to tell me that I’m cursed?” The question flew out of her mouth before she knew what she was saying, her eyes tearing up as she said the awful words aloud. She waited to hear her faerie godmother say there was no way Aurora could be cursed. That she had never heard of such a thing. That they would get to the bottom of everything together.

But instead of answering, her godmother turned and glared in the direction of the cottage. Butterflies of nerves flew around in Aurora’s stomach. She twisted her hands nervously. “Well?” Aurora said. “Is it true?”

Her godmother looked down at the ground and gave the smallest of nods. “It is,” she said softly.

Aurora felt her heart plummet. Until then she had been holding on to the hope that her aunts were the ones lying because they didn't want her to leave. Or, at the very least, that her faerie godmother had been in the dark about her past. That she hadn't been keeping anything from her. A whirlwind of thoughts bounced around in Aurora's head as she tried to make sense of what she was hearing.

"I was just a baby!" she cried, anguish filling her innocent face. "Who would do such a terrible thing to a baby? My aunts said it was an evil faerie. They said her name. They said...they said..."

"Maleficent," her godmother finished.

There was something in the way her godmother said the name that made Aurora's sinking heart pound faster. It was a familiarity, a knowingness. In that moment, a terrifying possibility struck Aurora. "Is that *your* name?" she asked, her voice shaking. "Are you Maleficent? Are *you* the one who cursed me?"

Slowly, the faerie turned around. Her face was racked with emotion. In her eyes Aurora saw anger, sadness, loss, and love, but most of all, regret. Before the faerie spoke a word, Aurora knew the answer. "Yes," Maleficent said.

Pain shot through Aurora and she began to back away. She had never felt pain like this. The pain of a horrible betrayal. She felt like she was being pricked by a thousand needles. She had trusted this faerie. She had loved this faerie. How could she have done such a horrible thing? She had taken away her parents, her home, her chance at a normal life. It was too much to bear.

"Wait..." Maleficent begged, reaching out her hand.

"No!" Aurora shouted, sobs beginning to shake her thin body. "Don't touch me! *You're* the evil that's in the world. It's you!"

Aurora turned and raced out of the glen. She didn't dare look back. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. She just knew she needed to get away from Maleficent and her lies as fast as possible. But she couldn't go back to the cottage. That place was filled with lies, too. So where was she going to go now?





It

took Aurora only a few minutes to realize she had one choice. She had to go see her father and mother. Dashing through the woods, she paused at the edge of the clearing around the cottage to make sure the pixies were still inside. Satisfied that the coast was clear, she snuck into the barn. In his stall, their horse stood munching hay. Not bothering even to saddle him, Aurora threw on his bridle, leapt onto his back, and then with a loud “yaw!” urged him forward.

They raced through the woods. Animals darted out of the way. Birds stopped singing. The only sounds Aurora could hear were the horse’s hoofbeats and her heart slamming against her chest. Spotting the road up ahead, she slowed the horse down only long enough to make sure no one was coming. The road was empty. She urged the horse on, and faster and faster they went until finally, Aurora found herself right in front of the castle’s main gates.

Pulling back on the reins, Aurora brought the horse to a halt. She stared up at the stone walls. She had never seen it this close. It had always been just a speck on the horizon or a part of her fantasies. In her daydreams, she had imagined the castle down to the very last detail. She had pictured it surrounded by a clear blue moat. She had envisioned

beautiful carvings perched atop turrets and a busy, happy feeling in the people who bustled about the grounds.

But this was not the castle of her dreams. Looking up at it now, she saw giant iron plates covering its every side. The moat was brown and the sky above the castle seemed darker than everywhere else. Walking slowly around the small cluster of surrounding buildings, Aurora saw that it was nearly empty. No children played near the large fountain in the middle. No women laughed as they did the washing. No men argued about the day's crops.

Listening for any signs of life, all Aurora heard was the pounding of hammer against anvil. She followed the noise and found herself outside the blacksmith's shop. Inside, nearly a dozen young men pounded away at various pieces of iron. Some shaped them into swords. Others appeared to be making more iron siding for the castle walls. And there were even a few who seemed to be crafting large iron thorns.

Backing away, Aurora shook her head. There was something wrong with this place. Something sad and scared. It felt nothing like her home in the clearing or the Moors with its many inhabitants. *What happened here to make it such a dark place?* she wondered. Was it a part of her curse?

There was only one way to get the answers. She had to find her mother and father. Quickly, she found her way back to the castle's main entrance and began to walk across the drawbridge.

"Halt!" came a voice from the shadows of the arch that covered the bridge.

Startled, Aurora stopped. Two guards stepped out from under the arch. They were covered in iron armor. In one guard's hand was a long sword. The other one held up a shield.

"Who goes there?" the guard with the sword asked. "State your business here."

Aurora took a deep breath. "I'm here to see my father, the king. And my mother, the queen." She felt the men's curious gazes on her. She knew what it must look like to them. A country girl, wearing a homemade dress with leaves in her hair, claiming to be the princess. It was rather far-fetched. Princesses wore crowns and beautiful gowns made of silk and lace. They didn't ride horses bareback or show up unannounced by themselves. Still, she needed them to believe she was telling the truth. Or at the very least, take her to see her parents.

After what felt like an eternity, the guard with the shield nodded. "Follow us," he said. "And stay close." They turned and began walking toward the castle's main entrance.

Aurora followed, letting out a quiet sigh of relief. Walking through the big iron doors, she found herself in the middle of a great entrance hall. A giant chandelier hung from the ceiling. Yet none of its candles were lit. In the dim light that came through the dirty windows, Aurora could make out several large paintings on the walls. Through another door she saw furniture draped with white linens, making it appear ghostlike. It was as though no one lived in the castle. Or at least no one cared enough to make it livable.

Realizing she had fallen behind the guards, Aurora raced to catch up. She was sure that as soon as she was reunited with her father and mother, they would explain everything.

Suddenly, it hit her. She was about to meet her parents. After nearly sixteen years of being apart, she was going to be held in their arms. She was going to be able to tell them all that had happened to her while she lived in the woods. She would be able to share her dreams. Her mother could brush her hair and her father could teach her the castle's history. They could sit for hours, together, just being a family. The thought made her smile despite the gloomy surroundings, and she picked up her pace.

A moment later, the guards came to a stop in front of a huge set of iron doors. One of them reached out and knocked once. Hearing a muffled response, they pushed the doors open and all three moved through. On the other side was the biggest, grandest room Aurora had ever seen. It dwarfed the entrance. Instead of one chandelier there were dozens. Huge stained glass windows dominated the far wall. Up on a pedestal sat two thrones, worn with age. And in the middle of the room, surrounded by his officers, was her father, King Stefan.

He wore a heavy suit of armor. On his head a crown perched, pushing down his wavy gray curls. While the other men seemed meek, her father had a commanding presence. He seemed to dominate the room and Aurora could just picture him on the battlefield, sword in hand. He was just as she had imagined. A bit older, perhaps, with a few more wrinkles and a slight stoop to his back. But nevertheless, he was handsome and she just knew he would be charming as well.

Grabbing Aurora by the arm, the guard with the sword stepped forward and cleared his throat. "Sorry to disturb you, Your Majesty," he

said. He pushed Aurora in front of him. "We found this urchin at the gate. She *claims* to be your daughter."

King Stefan slowly turned around. He stared at Aurora, his dark eyes revealing no hint of emotion. It was nearly the same look the guards had given her at the gate. The look that said, "All I see is a country girl. Not a princess." Yet it wasn't exactly the same look. There was a glimmer of recognition, as if he were looking at someone he had met once but couldn't quite remember her name.

Aurora couldn't take it any longer. Pulling free of the guard, she ran toward the king. "Father! It's me! It's Aurora!" When she was right in front of him, she threw her arms around Stefan and tried to bury herself in his embrace. But the heavy iron armor was cold and hard.

Placing his hands on her shoulders, King Stefan pushed her back so that he was holding Aurora at arm's length. He stared at her, taking in her long wavy hair and her button nose. His face softened and he smiled. "You look like your mother," he said. Then, just as quickly as the warmth had come, her father's face turned cold. It was as though a light had been briefly lit inside his soul only to be extinguished a moment later. "You shouldn't be here yet," he said, his voice now icy. "You've come back a day too soon. I told those three idiots!"

Aurora took a step back as though slapped. "You mean my aunts?" she asked, for she had no idea what else to call them. This was not the happy reunion she had anticipated. "Father, didn't you miss me while I was gone?"

The question seemed to take King Stefan by surprise and he hesitated before answering. "Of course," he finally said.

"Then why didn't you come to see me?" Aurora asked, her bottom lip trembling. Until that moment, she had never stopped to wonder that herself. True, she had been hidden in the woods. But her father was the king. If he had wanted to find her, he could have done so with ease.

"You were well looked after," King Stefan explained. "And I was occupied here with matters of state." He stopped and thought for a moment. The frown on his face deepened. "I'll have to put you in a secure place until tomorrow."

"But I've only just arrived," Aurora protested. "I want to stay with you."

Her father shook his head.

“I know about the curse,” Aurora said, hoping perhaps the reason he wanted to send her away was that he didn’t want to tell her the bad news.

Expecting a look of relief to cross his face, Aurora was surprised when her father grew angrier. “So then you know the danger you’re in,” he hissed. “Do not come out of your room for any reason. No matter what you hear. We’ll talk tomorrow when this is over.”

His orders given, Stefan turned to go. Behind him, Aurora stood, a look of sadness on her face. Ever since the pixies had told her the truth about who she was, all Aurora had wanted was to see her father and mother again. Yet her father was not the father she was hoping to find. *He is mean*, she thought. Still, she had one last hope.

“Where is my mother?” Aurora called out.

Stefan didn’t answer. Instead, he turned and nodded at one of the guards. “Take her,” he commanded. Then, with a swish of his long cape, he strode back over to his officers. A moment later, Aurora was led out of the room. With a bang, the giant iron doors swung shut.

Aurora and the guard made their way to her room in silence. Down a long hall, up a flight of stairs, through a sitting room, and up another smaller staircase they went. Finally, the guard stopped in front of a set of doors painted a lighter color than the others in the castle. Pushing them open, he gestured Aurora to enter. Once she was inside, he turned to go.

“Wait!” Aurora called out. “Do *you* know what happened to my mother?”

The guard shifted uncomfortably on his feet and a familiar sense of dread began to grow in Aurora’s belly. “The queen passed away, Princess,” he said. “A long time ago.” Then without another word he departed, leaving Aurora alone with only her sad thoughts for company.





Hours

passed.

The sun

began to lower in the afternoon sky. Up in her room, Aurora paced back and forth. She felt like a caged bird. She wanted to be downstairs with her father. She wanted to ask him how her mother had died. When it had happened. Instead she was stuck staring at the same four walls.

Not that they were ugly walls. Her room was beautiful. Four huge windows dominated the far side. Through them she could see the entire kingdom stretching out into the distance. The floor was covered in thick carpets and there was a large fireplace right in front of a canopy bed draped in the thinnest sheer fabric. Paintings depicting horses in fields and faraway lands hung on the walls.

Yet despite the room's beauty, there was a sadness to it. Clearly, the room had always been Aurora's. But it had been baby Aurora's, not suited to the teenager she had become. Hints of the childhood she could have had were everywhere. There was the wardrobe full of unworn baby clothes. A crib, its sheets dusty, rocked slowly behind the big bed. In one corner a pile of toys sat unused, the colors on them faded with age. And perhaps saddest of all was the large portrait of Aurora and her mother. In it, the queen was looking down at the baby in her arms, a smile of pure happiness on her face.

Staring at the portrait now, Aurora felt a pang of regret. She would never get to meet her mother. Never know what it felt like to be held in those arms. It made her angry. And she realized that her anger was directed at Maleficent. Maleficent, who had pretended to care but was the very reason Aurora had never known her mother.

With a sigh, Aurora resumed her pacing. Her head was pounding, she was thirsty, and for some reason, her finger was throbbing. She rubbed at it, trying to make the pain go away, but it only grew stronger. Once more she felt the urge to get out of the room. She needed to find something. She just wasn't sure what.

Hearing a noise from the hall outside, Aurora called out. "Hello? Is someone there? Can you hear me?"

"Yes?" a soft female voice said from the other side of the door.

"Unlock the door, please?" Aurora asked.

There was a pause and then she heard a key in the lock. A moment later the door swung open. Standing on the other side was a woman who looked about ten years older than Aurora. She was wearing a servant's uniform and carrying sheets. Seeing Aurora in front of her, the woman raised an eyebrow.

"This room is for the princess when she arrives," the servant said. "No one should be occupying it."

So clearly, Father hasn't announced my return, Aurora mused. But what did it matter? She didn't have time to correct the servant. She needed to find some way to stop the pain in her finger.

Heading past the woman, she walked out of the room and into the hall. It occurred to her that she had no idea where she was going or what exactly would help her finger. But she decided to keep walking anyway. She wound her way through various halls and down several flights of stairs, tiptoeing past the Great Hall. She could hear her father inside, shouting about some attack. Ignoring him, she kept walking. Luckily, no one was around to witness her wandering. While she wasn't happy her father was keeping her a secret, she didn't want to go against his wishes and make her presence known.

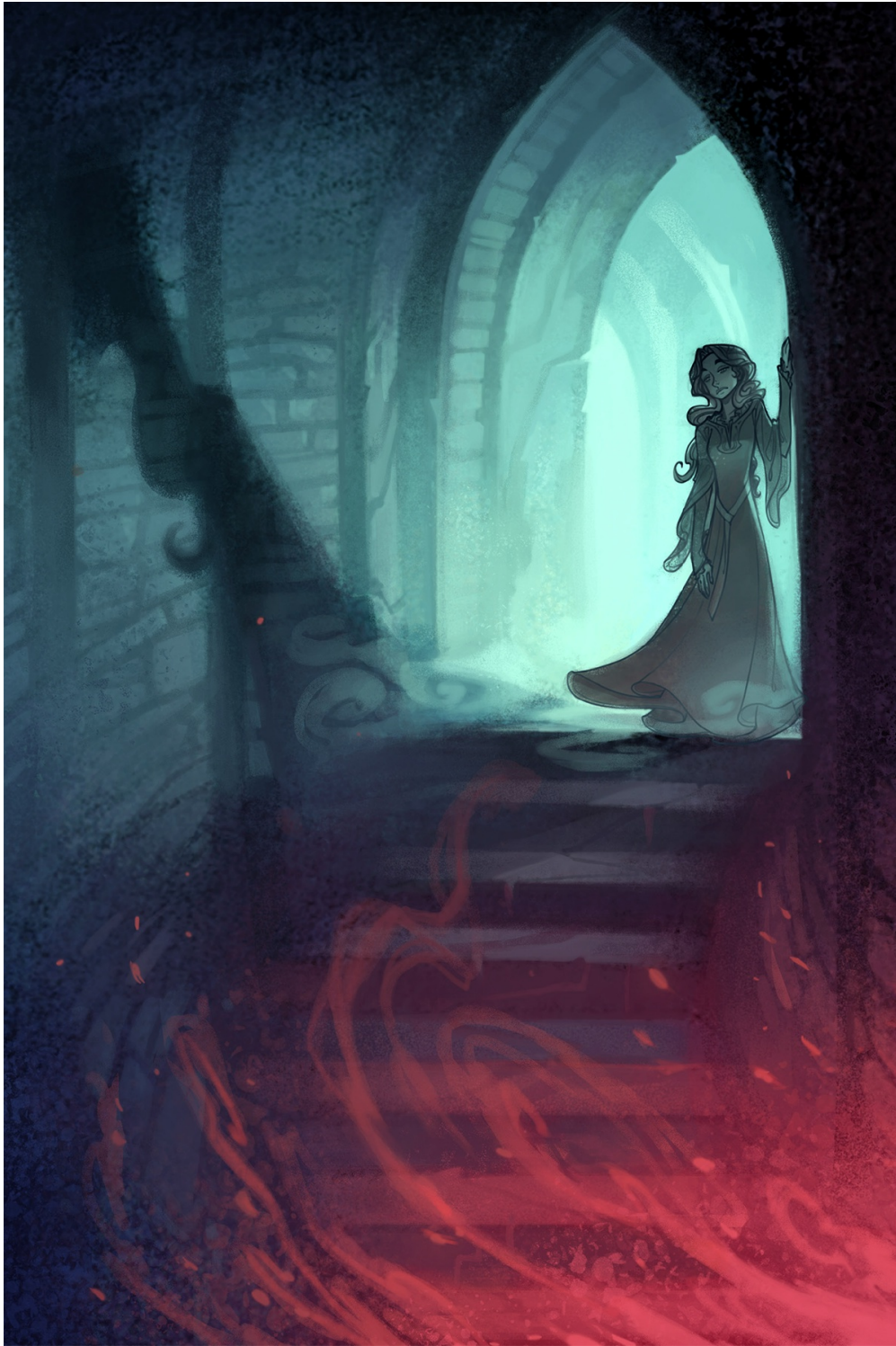
She continued on, rubbing the tip of her finger. It pulsed and felt hot to the touch. Looking down, Aurora expected to see it swollen or red. But it looked the same as it did every day. She moved on, finally arriving at the servants' wing. For some reason, that felt like the place she wanted to be.



Walking through a pair of swinging doors, she found herself at the top of a short staircase. She could make out a long hallway at the bottom and tiptoed down to it. On either side, doors led into various rooms where servants went about their daily chores, safely hidden from the eyes of the royals. One of the doors was open, and through it, Aurora saw a long table. Several older women sat around it, mending sheets and dresses by hand.

That's odd, Aurora thought. *In a place this big, one would think seamstresses would be given spinning wheels to use.* Her aunts had always told her that spinning wheels were silly things. That you could sew much better with your fingers than with a wheel. But Aurora wasn't completely naive. There was no way a castle this size could have everything mended by hand. That once again raised the question: where were all the spinning wheels?

Keep looking, a voice urged. *Keep looking until you find the spinning wheel. You need to touch it.*



Aurora shook her head. Where was that voice coming from? And why was it telling her to keep looking for a spinning wheel? Her finger throbbed again, more painful now than ever. Aurora walked on, pushing through the rows of hanging laundry and ignoring curious looks from the women who were sewing and washing. Outside, the sun began its final descent beneath the horizon, turning the sky a glorious shade of orange. But Aurora barely noticed. All she could think about was stopping the pain in her finger.

Pushing through one last line of clothing, Aurora found herself at the end of the laundry room. There, in front of her, was an object draped with cloth. It was old and covered in a thick layer of dust, but it had the distinct shape of a spinning wheel. Grabbing a corner of the cloth, Aurora pulled it away, sending a cloud of dust into the air. She sneezed. Then she looked down at the object she suddenly found so interesting.

It was old. The wheel had lost some spokes and the wood was cracking. But the needle on the tip of the spindle still shone as though it had been used only the day before. Taking a step closer, Aurora reached out her hand. The throbbing in her finger intensified. She was vaguely aware that the sun's final rays were spreading across the countryside. The room was growing darker, and yet the spinning wheel seemed to glow from within. From somewhere behind her, Aurora thought she heard someone call out "Stop!" But she didn't pay attention. All she could think about now was touching the tip of her finger to the spindle of the spinning wheel.

Everything around her blurred. Time seemed to slow. She forgot to care that her father was cold and heartless. She forgot to feel sad that she would never meet her mother. She even forgot to be mad at Maleficent. In fact, she couldn't remember why she was mad at her in the first place. All she could think about was the spindle.

Slowly, Aurora's hand moved closer and closer. Her index finger, still throbbing, was now mere inches away from the spindle. It hovered right above the needle, while inside her mind a voice was saying, "Yes! This is exactly what you should be doing at this moment!" And then, with the gentlest of touches, she placed her finger on the needle.

There was a small prick. The throbbing in Aurora's finger stopped. She felt a moment of relief and then...nothing. She slid to the floor, asleep.

The curse had been fulfilled.





PART FOUR



Knotgrass

was in trouble. She had known it as soon as she and the others had discovered Aurora was gone, and then when they'd found that the horse was missing, too. It could only mean one thing: Aurora had gone home.

Not only was this extremely dangerous for Aurora, what with the time of the curse fast-approaching, but it didn't exactly bode well for the pixies. As soon as King Stefan realized the pixies had failed to keep his daughter safe in the woods, he would be furious. And while Knotgrass had no idea how he would act on this anger, she knew she did not want to find out.

So Knotgrass made a decision. In order to save herself and the others, she turned all of them back into their original pixie forms—complete with wings. They teetered and tottered in the air, trying to get used to flying again. Knotgrass had to snap at Flittle multiple times for running into her. Finally, after a few more bumbling moments, the pixies were buzzing toward the castle.

It was strange returning to castle after so many years. It looked different than Knotgrass remembered. For one, there were iron plates lining the walls, making it look more like a cold fortress than a grand castle. For another, dozens of menacing-looking guards immediately stopped them.

After suffering through an intense line of questioning about who exactly they were and just what they were doing at the castle (a line of questioning which Knotgrass did not appreciate), they were quickly escorted into the castle, toward the princess's room.

"Excuse us, excuse us," Knotgrass called to the servants and handmaidens as they flew through the halls. "This is an emergency." The guard leading the pixies turned around to glare at her. Knotgrass harumphed quietly. Honestly, they didn't get any respect in this castle.

Soon the guard stopped before a set of large wooden doors. He opened them and paused before entering, giving the three pixies a view of a very somber scene. Thistlewit and Flittle gasped in unison, and Knotgrass merely stared. They were too late. It had already happened.

For there, lying on a bed, looking as though she were merely resting, was Aurora. Even in sleep she was beautiful. Her long golden hair fell on the pillows, shining in the candlelight. Her hands were clasped together, a single rose matching her red lips positioned between her fingers, her mouth parted in the smallest of smiles. She looked so serene.

Standing at the princess's bedside was King Stefan. And while Aurora looked peaceful, he looked furious. Hearing the guard enter with the three pixies in tow, the king whirled around to face them. "Look at her!" he shouted.

Knotgrass gulped and glanced once more at Aurora. Then she looked back at the king. He was angry, that was clear, but Knotgrass couldn't help asking herself *why*? Was it because he had lost his daughter all over again? Or was it a different reason? A less sentimental one. Was he, in fact, mad because Maleficent had won...again?

Either way, it didn't matter. If Knotgrass wanted to stay in the castle, she was going to have to fix this. "She's only sleeping," she pointed out.

"She might as well be dead," Stefan snapped.

"But what about the kiss?" Flittle asked softly.

Thistlewit nodded. "Yes! A kiss will wake her!"

King Stefan looked out the big windows at the Moors in the distance. He seemed lost in some long-ago memory. There was a moment when his features softened as though he was recalling a happy encounter.

And then they immediately hardened into a scowl again. It was as though he was remembering the moment Maleficent cursed Aurora all over again. "True Love's Kiss," he repeated. "Yes." Turning his attention back to the pixies, he added, "Find someone to do it. If you fail me again,

you will rot in the dungeon...forever.”



Knotgrass, Thistlewit, and Flittle wasted no time. They perused the castle for eligible young men but only found grumpy guards and busy servants. Nobody seemed to be a good candidate for breaking a sleeping beauty's curse.

“What about that one?” Flittle asked.

“That's a statue,” Knotgrass said exasperatedly.

Flittle squinted her eyes at the stone figure propped up against the wall. “Oh, yeah.”

“If only this castle was bigger,” Thistlewit sighed.

Then Knotgrass came up with a brilliant idea: they needed to look *outside* the castle and find someone worthy of kissing a princess. A wealthy nobleman, perhaps.

With a new plan in place, the three pixies flew as fast as they could through the large castle doors. They decided to make their way to the home of the richest member of Stefan's court. The family had a son. He was almost royalty. Aurora *was* royalty. Perhaps, Knotgrass reasoned, those were the makings of true love.

When they got to the home, they banged on the door until it was opened by the son. What luck!

“You have to come with us,” Knotgrass announced, pulling his sleeve.

“What?” The young man was clearly confused.

“Hurry!” Flittle said impatiently, grabbing the other sleeve. “By orders of the king.”

“Do not anger your king,” Thistlewit added, not wanting to be left out.

Knotgrass rolled her eyes. Why couldn't the others let her do the talking? But she was pleasantly surprised when the young man started to follow them to the castle. Sure, he asked all sorts of annoying questions on the way, but at least he was going with them.

Finally, the three pixies and the young nobleman were standing in front of Aurora. Knotgrass told the boy to kiss the princess.

“But she's asleep,” the young man pointed out.

“She won't mind,” Thistlewit said, trying to sound reassuring.

Knotgrass watched as he looked down at the princess in front of him. Then he shrugged, leaned over, and kissed her.

They waited. Nothing happened.

They waited some more. Still, nothing happened.

"You didn't do it properly!" Knotgrass shouted when it was clear Aurora was not going to wake up.

Flittle nodded. "It's supposed to be *True Love's Kiss*," she pointed out, as though it were clear he had only given her a regular old kiss.

"But I don't even know her," he protested.

Knotgrass sighed. "Get out," she said. When he was gone, she ordered the other two to go find another suitable young man in King Stefan's court and bring him back at once.

It didn't take them long.

"This is Princess Aurora," Knotgrass said to the young man who walked into the room. "Are you in love with her?"

While their first choice had seemed sweet and shy, this young man was brash and bold. He walked right up to Aurora's bedside and knelt down. "Madly," he answered.

Knotgrass nodded. *Good*. "You may kiss her, then."

Eagerly, the young man leaned down and pressed his lips to Aurora's. And just like last time they waited. Nothing happened. Then they waited some more. And *still* nothing happened.

"If it was true love, you would have woken her!" Flittle finally cried.

And just like last time, Knotgrass sighed and said, "Get out."

This was not going well. How were they supposed to find Aurora's true love when she had never even met a man before? There were only so many young men in the royal court. Eventually they would run out of chances, and then what? Knotgrass couldn't spend the rest of her life in a dungeon. She had already spent too many years trapped in a cottage in the middle of nowhere.

With a frustrated groan, Knotgrass turned toward the door. She needed to find a true love for Aurora, and fast. But where to start? If only somebody knew just who Aurora's true love was. And if only that somebody would bring Aurora's true love straight to them. Wouldn't that be nice?

But no, it was up to them to do all the work. Knotgrass sighed, pushing up her sleeves. She supposed she'd better start looking.





It

turned out Knotgrass didn't have to go far. Opening the door to Aurora's room, she found herself face to face with a young man. He was standing in the middle of the hallway, looking around as though he had no clue how he had gotten there. Despite the rather confused look on his face, he was the handsomest young man Knotgrass had ever seen. He had light brown hair and kind eyes. His shoulders and chest were broad and he carried himself well. He had a long cape around his shoulders and his leather riding boots were spattered with mud, as though he had recently been out riding.

Seeing the pixies, the young man smiled uncertainly. "Pardon me," he said. "I'm embarrassed to say I don't know where I am."

"King Stefan's castle," Thistlewit answered.

The young man perked up. "This is where I'm meant to be," he said, sounding surprised. "Odd that I can't recall how I got here. My father sent me to see the king."

Knotgrass's ears perked up. If the young man's father was sending him to see a king, it could mean... "Who is your father?" she asked.

"King John of Ulstead," the young man replied.

Knotgrass nearly squealed with joy. A prince. The young man was a prince! Who cared if he seemed to be bad with directions? It was just too perfect! He had to be the one who was going to give Aurora the kiss of true love. Why else would he have so mysteriously shown up there?

Grabbing him, the three pixies pulled him into Aurora's room and ushered him toward the bed.

"What's your name?" Knotgrass asked.

"Phillip," he replied.

"Well, Prince Phillip, meet Princess Aurora," Flittle said. Stepping back, she gestured at the sleeping beauty.

A look of surprise flashed across Phillip's face. "I know this girl," he said. "What happened to her?"

"She's trapped in an enchantment," Knotgrass answered as she stared at the young man. He actually seemed besotted by Aurora. He had met her? Where? And when? Wouldn't Aurora have told her if she had met a man? Knotgrass shrugged. It didn't matter if it meant Aurora would wake up.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Flittle asked.

Phillip nodded. "The most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

Knotgrass shared an excited glance with the other two pixies.

"Do you want to kiss her?" Thistlewit asked.

"Very much," Phillip replied, his eyes never leaving Aurora's face.

"Well go on, then," Knotgrass urged.

Phillip hesitated. Then he looked over at the pixies. "I wouldn't feel right about it," he said. "I barely know her. We only met once."

Knotgrass stifled a scream. Why was Phillip being such a gentleman? It was irritating. The longer he waited, the longer it would be until she knew if she was safe from Stefan's wrath or not. She was about to just push his head down when Flittle spoke up.

"Haven't you heard of love at first sight?" she asked, trying to reason with him.

Phillip nodded. Then, ever so slowly, he began to bend his head down toward Aurora's.

Knotgrass held her breath. He was getting closer and closer. And then he leaned up.

"An enchantment, you say?" he asked.

"Kiss her!" the pixies screamed.

Once more, Prince Phillip leaned down. And once more, he bent his head toward Aurora's. Knotgrass didn't dare breathe. It felt as if the whole room, the whole world, was holding its breath with her, waiting for this moment. Slowly, gently, Phillip pressed his lips against Aurora's. There was hope in the kiss. There was love. It was, in the history of kisses, one of the most perfect.

And still Aurora didn't wake up.

Leaning back, Prince Phillip looked over at the pixies. "Is something supposed to happen now?"

"Get out!" they all screamed.

Stumbling to his feet, Phillip exited the room. Behind him, the three pixies stood together, trying to figure out what to do next.

"I was so certain he was the one," Flittle said sadly.

Knotgrass crossed her arms. "We just have to keep looking," she said. "Scrape the bottom of the barrel. He doesn't have to be a prince. He doesn't even have to be handsome."

"Or that clean," Thistlewit added.

Together, they left the room. But they had only made it halfway down the hall when Knotgrass realized they hadn't shut the bedroom door. They couldn't have people wandering in and out with the princess in such a vulnerable state.

"Go ahead," she told the others. "Start looking for the next young man. I'll be right behind you." Then, turning, she made her way back to the room.

Reaching the door, she took one last look inside to make sure Aurora had not just woken up a bit late. Her eyes grew wide. Her heart began to race and she had to force herself not to scream in fright.

Because there, standing by Aurora's bedside, was Maleficent. Knotgrass couldn't believe her eyes. What was *she* doing there? And why did it look like she was crying? Tiptoeing farther into the room, Knotgrass ducked behind one of the dressers and waited to see what would happen.

As she watched, Maleficent sank to her knees. Then, ever so gently, she reached out and touched Aurora's hand. "I will not ask for your forgiveness," Maleficent said. "What I have done is unforgivable."

You can say that again, Knotgrass thought. *Cursing a baby and making me spend sixteen years as a human? It was downright rude.* Then Knotgrass looked at the genuine pain etched on Maleficent's face and she softened. Perhaps they hadn't been the only ones to suffer.

Unaware of her audience, Maleficent went on. “I was so lost in hatred and revenge. I never dreamed that I could love you so much, sweet Aurora.”

Knotgrass’s jaw dropped. Love? Maleficent *loved* Aurora? When had that happened? She had thought Maleficent incapable of emotion, except perhaps the mean and evil variety. Yet it was clear from the look on Maleficent’s face that she truly did care, greatly.

Holding her breath, Knotgrass waited to see what the horned faerie would say next.

“You stole what was left of my heart,” Maleficent said. “I used to be so bitter, so angry. I thought I would never love anyone again before you came along. And now I’ve lost you forever. But I swear no harm will come to you as long as I live. And not a day shall pass that I won’t miss your smile.” Ever so slowly, Maleficent leaned down and placed a single kiss on the girl’s forehead.

Knotgrass felt a surge of magic wash over the room and her eyes widened. The air seemed to shimmer and there was the sound of something old ripping away.

And then Aurora’s eyelids fluttered open.





PART FIVE



Aurora

struggled to wake. Her eyelids were heavy and her throat felt dry. But the pain in her finger was gone. Underneath her she felt soft sheets, and she could vaguely hear the sound of someone talking. But for the life of her, she couldn't recall how she had ended up lying in a bed. All she remembered was seeing a spinning wheel, reaching out, and...

That was it! That had been the curse! She had pricked her finger and fallen into a deathlike sleep. Yet she was waking up now.

Forcing her eyes open, she found herself looking right up into Maleficent's face. The faerie's eyes were wet with tears and they looked back at her cautiously, as though scared of what Aurora might say.

Of course she is worried. I was so mad at her before. Yet—and Aurora thought long and hard—I'm not now. That feeling had faded. In its place she felt a sense of peace, as though all was as it should be. True, Maleficent might have cursed her. But that had been a long time before. She must have had her reasons. And since the day they met in the glen, surrounded by the Moors, Maleficent had never done her harm. *She has shared her world with me,* Aurora realized. *She has guided me and taught me so many wonderful things.* Then she smiled.

“Hello, Godmother,” Aurora said.

For a moment, Maleficent didn’t say anything. Fresh tears welled in her eyes. But these weren’t sad tears; they were happy ones. Finally, her voice choked with emotion, she said, “Hello.”



Maleficent spent the next few minutes filling Aurora in on some of the events that had transpired long before. Aurora listened, her emotions churning rapidly. She was sad to find out that her father seemed more concerned with destroying Maleficent than reuniting with his daughter. That he had betrayed Maleficent so long before, when she had only been trying to fulfill her parents’s goal for peace. That he had made her think she’d been wrong, that her parents had been wrong. That all humans were to be distrusted.

Then Maleficent told her what had happened since she pricked her finger. Aurora’s feelings toward Phillip, who had tried so valiantly to wake her from sleep, were confusing. And ultimately, she was happy that Maleficent’s kiss had been the only thing strong enough to lift the curse. For, as Maleficent explained, all those years earlier she had been so full of pain and anger that it had been channeled into the curse. She’d had no way of knowing then that as a result, the only thing that would ever be able to break the curse was an emotion equally strong.

“Love,” Aurora said when Maleficent paused. “You love me that much, don’t you?”

Maleficent nodded.

Aurora smiled. This was the love of a mother for her daughter. A love neither of them had ever known and now never wanted to be without. Standing up, she held out her hand. It was time to go and find her father.



Together they made their way out of Aurora's bedroom and down the long hall. The lights on the wall flickered, casting eerie shadows on the iron. Aurora's eyes widened as they turned down one hall. It was covered in large iron thorns, their sharp points gleaming. It looked like a terrifying reproduction of the Thorn Wall that kept the Moors safe. Aurora suddenly felt nervous about seeing the king. She had spent only a few minutes with him and knew he was cold. But what kind of person would line his halls with thorns? What had happened to him in the sixteen years she had been gone?

Finally, they came to a set of doors. Pushing them open, Aurora found herself standing on a balcony that looked over the Great Hall. A huge staircase led down into the center of the room. It was dark and eerily quiet. Nothing like the home Aurora had imagined she would find. Nothing like the place she *wanted* to call home.

"Are we going back to the Moors now?" Aurora asked, turning to look at Maleficent.

The faerie nodded. "If that is what you wish."

Aurora nodded. Smiling, Maleficent began to descend the long stairs. Behind her, Aurora followed. The raven flapped overhead, his black form nearly disappearing in the darkness of the hall. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Maleficent hesitated, as though sensing something. She turned and motioned for Aurora to stay there. Then, cautiously, she stepped farther into the room.

Suddenly, there was a loud creaking sound. Aurora looked up, and her eyes grew wide as she watched a giant iron net covered in spikes fall from the ceiling. It landed directly on top of Maleficent. The faerie let out a scream as the spikes stabbed into her, the iron burning her skin. She lurched forward, trying to shake off the net, but it was no use. It clung to her every step of the way. Only her two large horns remained free of the netting, their pointed tips protruding from the top.

A moment later, there was the sound of heavy footsteps, and a line of soldiers, all wearing armor, marched out of the shadows. Ignoring Aurora, they surrounded Maleficent. Then they used their iron spears to secure the net to the floor.

Aurora raced forward, pushing her way past the guards and kneeling down next to Maleficent. As the soldiers began to stab at Maleficent with their iron weapons, Aurora desperately tried to lift the net. "Stop!" she cried in vain. "Don't hurt her!" She let out a scream as two of the soldiers

grabbed her and began to drag her away.

Kicking and screaming, Aurora struggled to free herself from the soldiers' grasp. They just kept dragging her farther and farther away from Maleficent until they unceremoniously let her go. As Aurora looked at the faerie, she choked back a sob. Maleficent was fading before her very eyes. Every moment under the iron net was draining her. If she didn't get out soon, she would die.

Then Aurora saw Maleficent's lips move. A moment later, there was a sound like something exploding. Turning her head, Aurora saw that Maleficent's raven had fallen to the ground. At first, Aurora thought one of the guards had hurt the bird, but then the creature began to transform. His beak grew longer and longer until it became a snout filled with razor-sharp teeth. His neck stretched out and his body grew. Where his talons had been, long claws appeared and dug into the hard floor. A tail extended from his back and his feathers disappeared, replaced by scales. When the transformation was complete, the bird was completely gone. In his place stood a huge fire-breathing dragon.

Aurora took a step back. The creature was terrifying. He lifted his head back and roared. All around her the guards let out frightened shouts as more men raced into the room, alerted by all the commotion. Seeing the dragon, the new guards lifted their shields and raised their spears. They charged.

Opening his mouth, the dragon let out a huge burst of white-hot fire. It filled the room, igniting the chandeliers and melting the dozens of wax candles instantly. Turning his head, the dragon laid flame to several of the long wooden ceiling beams. The old wood caught fire quickly. It crackled and groaned as the roof began to weaken. Ignoring the destruction he was causing, the dragon leaned down and, with his teeth, gently grabbed the iron net covering Maleficent.

As Aurora watched, the faerie pushed herself to her feet. She was gasping and seemed disoriented. Aurora took a step forward, ready to race to Maleficent's side, when suddenly there was a loud, unearthly groan. A moment later a giant wooden beam, its ends still flaming, crashed down just a few inches ahead of Aurora.

Stifling a scream, Aurora turned and ran up the stairs. Behind her she could hear the roar of the dragon and the screams of men. There was the whistle of arrows as they flew through the air and the sizzle of flames as more things caught on fire. She wanted to help Maleficent, but there was

nothing she could do in that room. Reaching the top of the stairs, she saw the door they had come through earlier. It was blocked by a burning beam. To the right of it was another door that was open. Aurora ran toward it. She needed to get help. Maleficent had saved her once; now it was her turn to save Maleficent.



Aurora

slammed the door. Her heart was pounding and her hands shaking. Closing her eyes, she leaned her forehead against the hard door. For a moment, she just stood there, trying to slow her racing pulse so she could think of what to do. Slowly, the sound of her heartbeat grew softer. Just when she thought she was safe, she felt a tingle at the base of her neck, as though there was something, or someone, behind her.

Aurora whipped around. She saw that she had entered one of the castle's turret rooms. The space was round, with small windows placed at uneven heights along the walls. Opulent rugs sprawled across the floor, and a large desk covered in papers sat in the corner. But what made her skin crawl was a giant case propped up against the far wall.

Inside, trapped behind thick panels of glass and wrapped in an iron chain, was a pair of massive black wings. Maleficent's wings.

Approaching the case, Aurora peered through the glass. Her heart broke as she stared at the source of so much of Maleficent's pain. Her father had taken these majestic wings from Maleficent. He had taken them to gain the throne and, in doing so, had set in motion a horrible course of events.

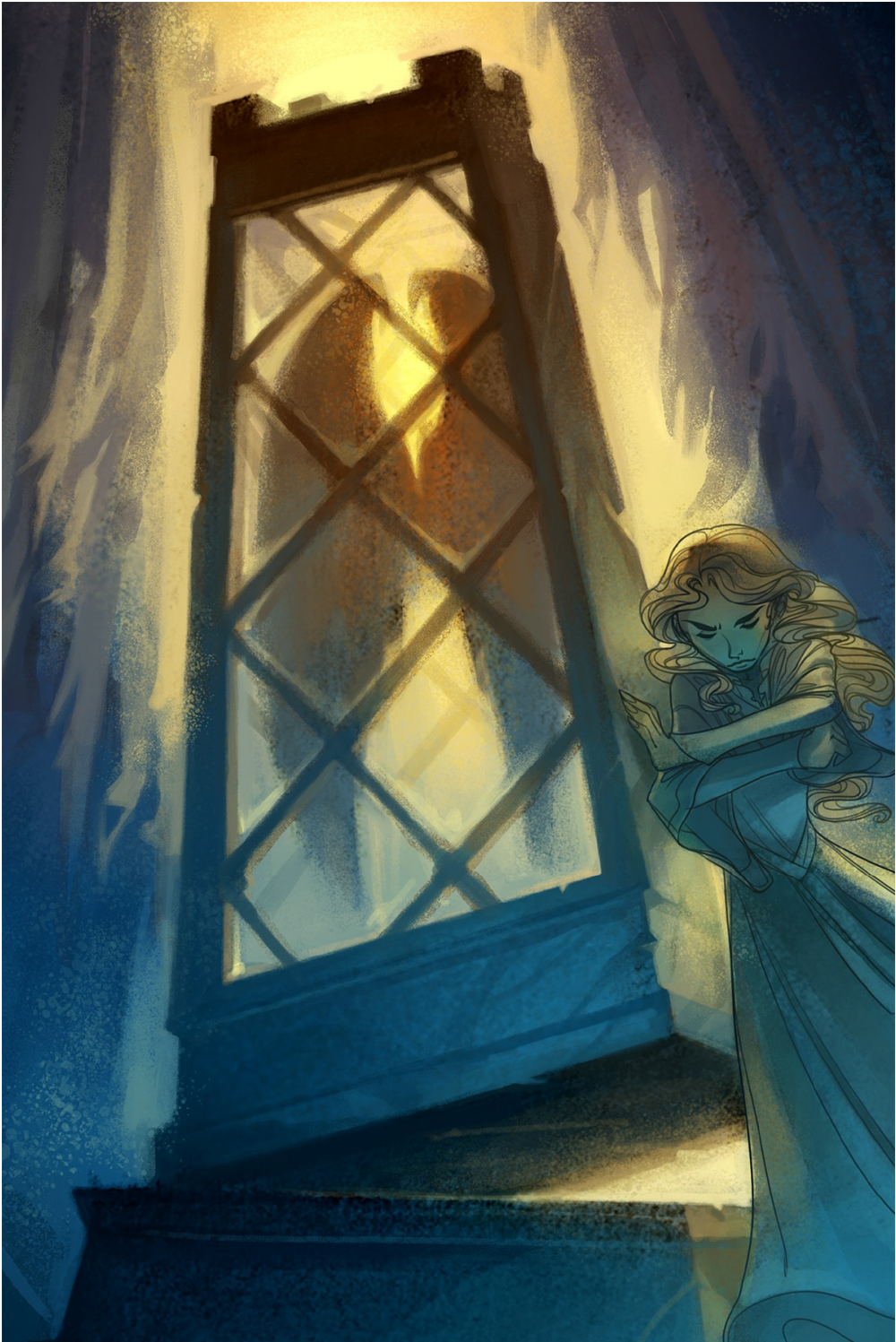
It was *his* fault she had been cursed. It was *his* fault she had never known her mother and lived her entire life in a lie. Anger welled up inside Aurora. She didn't know what to do now. Should she go back and face her father? Or get to the safety of the Moors?

And then, inside their cage, Maleficent's wings fluttered.

Aurora's eyes grew wide and a smile spread across her face. Now she knew just what to do. She had a plan.

Using all of her strength, she began to push the case. It tilted a few inches off the floor...then a few inches more. With a giant crash, it fell to the ground, glass shattering everywhere. Aurora took a step back. All she could do now was wait and hope that her instincts were right—that she had just found a way to save Maleficent.





Aurora ran back out onto the balcony and looked down at the Great Hall. To her chagrin, Stefan's guards were beginning to get the upper hand. They had managed to tie the dragon down and had pushed Maleficent back into a corner. Still weak from her time under the net, the faerie could do little to fend off the attacks of their iron spears. Her face was pale and Aurora could see that her faerie godmother was shaking. Still, Maleficent kept her head held high.

Hearing the sound of heavy footsteps, Aurora looked toward the hall's main entrance. Her father had entered the room. King Stefan was clad entirely in iron, from the helmet on his head to the tips of his iron boots. Only his eyes were visible through the holes in his mask. In his hand he held a long iron whip. It was covered in spikes, and as he walked closer to Maleficent, he swung it back and forth.

CRACK!

Maleficent let out a gasp as the whip snaked out and knocked her to the ground. Taking large, purposeful strides, Stefan took off his helmet and stared down at the helpless faerie. Aurora was shocked to see such coldness in his eyes.

"You have no idea how much I've regretted sparing your life," he said, raising the whip. It snapped through the air, the metal wrapping around Maleficent's body. Stefan began to drag her along the floor. "How does it feel to be a faerie creature without wings? In a world where you have no power?"

Watching her father treat Maleficent like some sort of animal, Aurora felt sick to her stomach. She couldn't believe that she had thought for even one moment that Maleficent was the evil in the world. Maleficent wasn't the evil one—it was her father. *He* was the monster.

Stefan threw Maleficent onto the steps of the throne. Sneering down at her, he pulled out his heavy iron sword. Maleficent struggled to her knees and looked up into Stefan's eyes. Aurora knew Maleficent was defenseless. She knew the faerie felt trapped with nowhere left to go. But still Maleficent did not show fear in front of Stefan. She simply looked up at him, pity in her eyes.

Stefan raised his sword high above his head, ready to make the final move. Maleficent closed her eyes. Aurora opened her mouth to shout.

And then there was an explosion of light.

Energy and magic filled the Great Hall, knocking soldiers off their feet and sending Stefan staggering back. When the light faded, Maleficent

stood on the steps. She was no longer weak. She was glowing with power and with something much more. She was glowing with happiness.

Tears fell from Aurora's eyes as she watched Maleficent's big black wings open wide. The wings had found their way back home. They had reunited with Maleficent—just as Aurora had planned when she toppled the glass case.

Taking off into the air, Maleficent circled the hall. She swooped and soared, dove and swirled. Below her, Stefan's men threw spear after spear, but she dodged them with ease. She had been born to move this way, and her body remembered how to do so with grace and ease.

She flew over to one of the chandeliers and cut its rope. With a crash, it fell to the ground, the flames from its candles burning through the ropes that held the great dragon down.

With a triumphant roar, the dragon lurched to his feet and began to wreak havoc once again. As he breathed a dazzling, glowing fire, Maleficent continued her flight.

"She's going for the window!" Stefan shouted.

The guards on the ground shot more arrows. Once again, they fell harmlessly short. With a cry of rage, Stefan raised his spiked chain high. He began to twirl it over his head. Faster and faster it went. Then it whipped out and wrapped around Maleficent's ankle. She let out a gasp as pain once again washed over her.

"I've got you!" Stefan cried. He wrapped his end of the chain around his wrist for leverage. Then he began to try to pull her down toward him. But Maleficent had her wings back, and they gave her a strength she hadn't possessed before. With a mighty flap, she moved forward, dragging Stefan along behind her.

Aurora watched the pair locked in battle. She didn't want her father to win, but she didn't want him to get hurt. She just wanted him to leave Maleficent alone. Yet even though he was the weaker of the two, Stefan clung stubbornly to the chain.

Aurora saw that Maleficent was struggling with what to do next. Seeing the large stained glass window ahead of her, Maleficent flew faster and faster. There was a loud *CRACK* as her horns slammed into the glass, and a moment later, she crashed through, dragging Stefan behind her and into the outside world.

Racing down the stairs and across the Great Hall, Aurora headed for the window. She leaned out through the now broken stained glass. A full

moon hung high in the sky, illuminating Maleficent's wings in a cool blue light as she flew over one of the bridges that spanned the castle. Below her, Stefan hovered a few feet above the stone edifice.

Then Maleficent swooped down. The sudden movement caused Stefan to lose his grip on the chain. There was a thud as he hit the bridge. A moment later, Maleficent landed nearby.

She quickly dropped to her knees and pulled the painful chain off her ankle. Then, standing up, she turned to stare at Stefan. From her spot above, Aurora saw a heated look pass between the pair. Fury flashed in Maleficent's eyes and she began to stalk toward Stefan. In one swift move she grabbed him by the neck and lifted him to his feet.

Aurora's breath caught in her throat. She had never seen such anger in Maleficent. The faerie was shaking with barely controlled rage. Her fingers tightened around Stefan's neck and the king gasped desperately for air. For a terrifying moment, Aurora was convinced Maleficent was going to kill her father. But then the faerie looked up at Aurora. Time stood still as their eyes locked.

The anger seemed to leave Maleficent's body in a rush. Without a word, Aurora knew that Maleficent had realized that anger would get her nowhere. Forgiveness was a far more powerful tool, and she would not hurt Aurora by hurting her next of kin. She would not use violence to solve the conflict. She would opt for peace. Maleficent dropped Stefan to the ground and turned. Smiling up at Aurora, she lifted her wings.

Through the broken window, Aurora smiled back at her faerie godmother. But the smile faded as she watched her father struggle to his feet. The man was still gasping for air and his neck was red. His eyes bore into Maleficent's back.

Letting out a shout, he charged straight at the faerie. His body slammed into her, the momentum pushing both of them closer to the edge of the bridge. Then they fell over the side. Aurora screamed.

The pair hung in the air for a moment before they began to fall toward the ground. Faster and faster they went, tumbling head over foot. The ground rushed up at them and still Stefan clung to Maleficent. His arms were wrapped so tight that Maleficent couldn't free her wings. If something didn't change, they were going to die together.

And then, as Aurora watched in horror, Stefan let go. Free of his weight, Maleficent swooped back up into the air. Below her there was a thud. And then all went quiet....



EPILOGUE

Aurora

stared out over the large Thorn Wall. In the bright light of day, it seemed smaller than she remembered. So much had happened since she'd first laid eyes on its twisted, sharp branches. She had discovered magic, met fantastic creatures, and learned the power of a true love. She had learned the true cause of her mother's death, a broken heart. She had met her father, only to lose him shortly thereafter. It was hard for her to think of his death—and of all the pain he had caused.

After his fall, Maleficent told Aurora the whole story. She told her how she had once thought Stefan was her true love. How they had bonded because they were both orphans, how she had loved him despite what she'd heard about the greediness of humans and their wars against her kind. How she'd believed in his goodness and in goodness in other humans, despite the fact that humans had killed her parents.

Both Stefan and Maleficent had agreed that peace could be possible between the two worlds. Peace was something Maleficent's parents had fought for, a legacy Maleficent had so badly wanted to uphold. Maleficent and Stefan had believed that if they could lead by example, other fairies and humans could choose to live together in harmony.

They had spent their youths always in each other's company, but after a time, Stefan had grown more and more restless.

"He'd always wanted to live in the castle," Maleficent had explained. "He was an orphan who wanted treasure, who wanted power more than anything."

She went on to tell Aurora that Stefan eventually found work as a servant in the castle, that he had cut off her wings to gain the throne.

It was that betrayal that had filled Maleficent with such pain and anger for trusting a human. Driven mad with heartbreak, she had cursed baby Aurora, hoping to destroy Stefan's chance at happiness. Ironically, Maleficent admitted, the person she had ended up hurting the most was herself.

As the fairy had grown to know Aurora, she realized that Stefan's daughter was a kindred spirit, one who loved and respected nature as much as she did. Through Aurora, she had accomplished the unthinkable—she had learned to love and trust again. She'd learned that peace between humans and faeries was indeed possible.

When she was done with her sad tale, Maleficent apologized over and over again. But Aurora was not angry. She knew the truth now. And it was clear to her that Stefan had never been a good man. He would have driven himself crazier with anger and would eventually have died in his effort to destroy Maleficent. He had no room in his heart for anything but revenge. So while it hurt to know she would never hear his voice say "I love you" or feel his arms around her, Aurora couldn't blame Maleficent. She was the only family Aurora had now—the only family she could imagine ever needing.

Turning her attention back to the present, Aurora watched as Maleficent lifted her hands in the air and shot magic at the thorns. Instantly, a section of the Wall wilted. She was destroying the barrier. Now that Stefan was dead, Aurora was the ruler of his kingdom. And she had no intention of keeping the humans and faeries apart any longer. From then on they would live together in harmony.

Feeling Aurora's gaze on her, Maleficent turned and smiled. She took Aurora's hand. "Follow me," she said.

Aurora nodded. Together they made their way deeper into the Moors. As they walked, they were joined by more and more faeries and woodland creatures. There was a festive air to the procession and it grew as they came closer to the heart of the Moors. Aurora's eyes grew wide as she

made her way into the center of a large clearing.

It seemed that all the creatures of the Moors had gathered in the clearing, even ones Aurora had never seen before. They cheered for Aurora and Maleficent. A sprightly little faerie flew up to Maleficent, hugging her shoulder. Aurora had never seen her faerie godmother so happy, positively glowing among all the Fair Folk. Standing in the middle of them, high up on a stone shaped like a throne, were Knotgrass, Thistlewit, and Flittle. In her hands, Knotgrass struggled to hold a large crown.

“We present this crown to our little Aurora,” she began. “For whom we have sacrificed the best years of our...” Her voice trailed off as Maleficent shot her a stern look.

Taking the crown from the pixie, Maleficent gently placed it on Aurora’s head. Then she turned toward the crowd and, with a look of motherly pride, announced, “You have your queen!”

As the crowd erupted in cheers, Aurora stepped forward and laced her hand through Maleficent’s. She turned to smile at those coming up to congratulate her. Phillip was leading the crowd, and her smile grew into a wide grin as she saw him approach. She was so happy that he was here, so happy that everyone she cared about was sharing in her joy.

That day, two kingdoms became one. The Moors would be open to humans and the castle walls would ring with the laughter of faeries. Looking up at Maleficent, Aurora smiled. She had a home, a mother, and a kingdom. No matter what happened next, Aurora knew they were both going to live happily ever after.

